

Introduction

This story is an AU, set during the fifth book, The Order of the Phoenix. Now, while it is set during that general time frame, it does not strictly adhere to the details of those events, nor the order that they took place in the book. So you should know before you continue that I have made changes (many, many changes) to the real HP Universe in order to better suit my story.

This story is a Harry/Angelina romance.

Flames. Flames are not banned—but there is a request I'd like to make. If you really don't like the fic, please explain why. Constructive criticism will help me as a writer, not only by helping me to understand how my story could improve, but also by allowing me to see what other authors find particularly appealing/unappealing about my writing.

Please review. I didn't write this thing for me, I wrote it for you! Let me know what you think! That would be so great. Thanks!

I don't think I need to tell you that Harry Potter is not mine. But I just did, so...there.

Lessons

Harry Potter Fan Fiction by Kendra

Chapter One: Second Kiss

The rain was coming down in sheets.

Harry was soaking wet and shivering slightly. He could hardly see through the fog on his glasses, but even if he could, it would still be near impossible to catch a glimpse of that little golden gnat of a ball, the Snitch, through the curtain of rain. The only clear sound above the pounding rain was of Angelina Johnson's whistle, which sent out a shrill blast every few minutes.

The sound hit his eardrums yet again, followed by Angelina's booming voice. Harry had no idea how she managed to keep it that loud over the noise of the rain so consistently without magic. The girl had quite a set of pipes on her.

"Ron! You're not paying attention!" She yelled as she sent the Quaffle through one of his rings yet again.

Ron did a sort of half-dip in an attempt to block it, but ended up losing control and swinging around in a circle. The ball shot right past him. Harry flew a little lower, his eyes falling on Ron's miserable shape hovering a few feet away from the three goals he was supposed to be defending. The youngest Weasley boy looked about ready to hurl himself head-first into the pitch. Harry wished he could say something to him, but then realized he didn't exactly know what would help.

"I am paying attention! You're hitting it too fast!" He heard Ron yell a bit too desperately. He winced at this, knowing full-well what Angelina was about to say. He also knew that her response was justified and he suspected Ron did too.

"Too fast?! You're joking, right?"

Harry turned to look at Angelina, who also looked miserable, but in the angriest sense of the word. She wasn't particularly angry at Ron, or any one person—she was frustrated that this practice drill was going so horribly, because it meant that they still had so much work to do before the Gryffindor/Slytherin match less than a week away. He felt for her. Oliver Wood's shoes were huge things to fill, and he empathized with the amount of pressure she must've been feeling then. He'd been watching her progress with the team she'd gathered this year, and though he knew she was doing the best she could with them all, he could tell that she was probably holding back. As much as it pained him to see Ron miss save after save, Harry knew that if Angelina just pushed a little more he would show her why she picked him to be Keeper in the first place. Harry had confidence in Ron, but as tough as Angelina was, he felt she needed to be tougher.

Harry blinked, thinking that he had finally caught sight of the Snitch and this horrendous practice drill would finally be over, but when he

looked again he realized that it was an illuminated wand-tip, and someone making his or her way across the pitch.

“Oi! Down there!” Fred yelled, pointing the figure out to everyone. Harry flew even lower, to where he could make out who was coming. It was Hermione, and she was running as fast as she could across the slippery grass, her cloak half-heartedly slung across herself as protection from the rain. She was soaked and panting, and by the time they’d all noticed her, she was in the middle of the pitch, waving for them all to land.

“What’s happened, Hermione?” Harry asked, landing just in front of her.

She shook her head fervently and said nothing until everyone had landed and were all crowded around her. Angelina was the last to land, dropping all of the balls she’d been gathering into the team equipment trunk and flinging her long, wet hair from her soaked face.

“What is it?” she asked, her brow furrowed with still-lingered frustration from the practice.

“I-I’ve just come from the Great Hall! Umbridge has posted another decree! This one’s the w-worst!”

“What’s it say?” Ron demanded.

Hermione shook her head again. “You have to see it for yourself. All of you.”

Harry led the pack, Angelina on his heels, as they all made their way stomping across the soggy grass and back up to the castle. They bypassed the locker rooms and instead cut around the edges of the forest to the front entrance, where they would head straight for the Great Hall. Most of the students were already gathering there, the buzz of what was happening setting a low hum of voices all around them as they made their way through the crowd. Harry could make out a few angry voices yelling “Rubbish!” and “She can’t do that! That’s criminal!” These only served to propel him forward even more; his cheeks were flushed with anticipation as his eyes searched out

the bulletin board. Angelina let out an exasperated groan next to him and he turned to look at her. She looked back, her eyes sharp with dread. "If it's about Quidditch, I'm going to kill that miserable old ha--!"

"Harry look!" Colin Creevey ran up to him at that moment, grabbing his arm and pulling him forward through the crowd. He pointed a tiny finger at the board, looking back and forward from it to Harry's face with pinched expectation. Harry's eyes traveled over the absurdly neat script, reading each pompous, self-assured word and with every passing second his anger grew.

Every school organization, club, and team had been disbanded and would not be reinstated until the "High Inquisitor" had given her expressed approval to do so. This applied to all of the Quidditch teams. Harry felt like ripping the parchment from the board and setting it ablaze with his wand. He could hear Angelina and the others' infuriated gasps behind him and knew that they had all read the decree.

"She's bloody mad!" Ron screeched, his cheeks on fire from anger. His wet hair flopped to and fro as he shook his head heatedly, twisting his fists around his broom as if he were wringing someone's neck. "Mental! How can Dumbledore let her get away with this?"

"It's not like he really has any say, is it?" Hermione offered, still shivering slightly from being soaked. "The Ministry has their hands in everything now..."

"Harry, what are we gonna do? We can't let that dirty fat toad get away with this!" Ron turned to face him now, but Harry said nothing. He remained silent, incensed, staring straight ahead.

Everyone turned to Angelina. She had backed away from the board and was now sitting limply at the end of one of the long tables. The crowd had pretty much dispensed at Filch's grumpy urging. Harry saw the crotchety old caretaker smirk gleefully at him over his shoulder as he shooed them out. Now all that was left was the soaking-wet team, Hermione, and Colin.

Harry watched Angelina, feeling more sympathy for her than anyone else. It was her last year, and she'd finally been made team captain—only to have it snatched away from her by Umbridge. No one spoke. They all awaited Angelina's word on the matter. They were probably expecting her to reassure them that despite this little setback, everything would be fine. There was no way Umbridge would permanently disband Quidditch. None of the teachers, the heads of houses, or Dumbledore would stand for it. But looking at Angelina's face, Harry knew that she would not offer them hope, and when she finally spoke his suspicions were confirmed.

"She won't approve us..."

"What?" Hermione gasped. "But, that's absurd! Of course she will; she has to, Quidditch is too important to too many people!" she reasoned, repeating everything Harry had thought.

"I didn't say she'd get rid of Quidditch all together, but she won't approve our team." Angelina's eyes met Harry's, and he knew what she was thinking.

So did everyone else, apparently, because now all eyes were on him suddenly. This made him angrier still. So they thought it was his fault, did they? Did they think because he was the only one willing to stand up to Umbridge that they'd all been punished for it? Looking from face to face, Harry could not help feeling that yes, they did hold him partially responsible for what was happening.

"It's not my fault," he said quietly, trying not to lose his temper.

Hermione shook her head, though her eyes belied her denial. "Harry no one's saying that."

"But it's what you're all thinking," he replied evenly, his temper pushing at him. "You all think because I've been telling the truth about Voldemort, she's punishing you for it?"

"Get a grip, mate, no one's accused you." Fred said somewhat half-heartedly. He was staring at the floor, all traces of his usual, sarcastic self deflated. George stood next to his brother, also looking forlorn.

"You don't have to say anything!" Harry erupted finally. "I can see it in your faces!" He glared at them all. They'd gone from looking at him to purposefully not looking at him and this was enough to convince him even more that he was right. He let out an exasperated grunt and turned on his heel, not wishing to remain there a second longer.

Sweeping past a scared-looking Colin, Harry made his way out of the Great Hall, determined not to look back.

Harry kept his head bowed as he made his way up to Gryffindor Tower. His mind swam with bitter thoughts. There was a mixture of righteous anger and hurt that churned around inside him as he lumbered along through the halls, not looking up at anyone he passed. He'd endured these detentions with Umbridge only through the knowledge and self-assurance that his friends were behind him; that the truth about Voldemort and Cedric's death should be told and they all knew it. But now it seemed that the more Umbridge did to change things for the worse at Hogwarts the less confidence they all had in him. Everyone was telling him to calm down, think rationally. It seemed they had all stopped listening, and were now only concerned about how Harry's defiance was affecting them. He was sorry about that; sorry about what Umbridge was doing; but it made him burn with anger every time someone told him to keep his mouth shut about Voldemort. He hated being thought of as a liar. Blind...they were all blind. And now his friends were becoming seduced by comfort over the right thing.

As he walked throbbing in his hand became intense and quite painful after a while of being numb. It sometimes stopped hurting so much when he was distracted, like earlier on the Quidditch field when he was trying to find the Snitch in sheets of rain, but now it grew to such a point that he had to bite the inside of his cheek. The wet Quidditch robes he was wearing were heavy and scratchy and every time he scraped it against them, he winced at the pain. This of course only served to worsen his mood.

"Do they think I like having my detention carved into my skin?" he whispered to himself angrily. "Do they think I wanted this to happen?"

Harry wasn't really paying attention to where he was going and after a while of walking aimlessly through the empty halls, he realized that he had passed the fat lady's portrait ages ago. He cursed under his breath and turned around, grumpily heading back the way he came. Rounding a corner quickly, he was hardly prepared when his body collided with someone else's.

"Hey--!"

The wind was nearly knocked out of him as both bodies fell to the ground hard. Harry's Firebolt went sliding across the marble floor, and the person he'd run into let out a loud curse. Her voice was instantly familiar to him, and he sat up, straightening his glasses so he could see properly.

"What'd you do that for?" he demanded, a little too harshly, swatting a lock of damp hair out of his eyes.

"Oh shove off, Potter!" Angelina shot back just as crossly.

They glared at each other for a moment; both seemingly unwavering in their annoyance with one another. After that moment, however, Angelina burst into a fit of laughter that made Harry quirk an eyebrow at her. Her eyes watered up and he watched, bemused, as Angelina curled up on the ground, her torso trembling with the giggle fit he'd somehow induced.

"It's not funny. Hey—don't laugh! I'm still mad at you." He tried to hold onto his annoyance, but her face drained it right out of him and he gave a chuckle as she tried to speak.

"I-I c-can't help it! Your f-face!" She giggled with her beautiful face scrunched up in genuine silliness, not anger. "You're so mad, it's funny!" Harry did not rush her to stop, for he hadn't seen her like this in weeks. She'd been distant and on edge for a long time; not to mention he'd hardly seen her because he was dealing with his own problems and Umbridge. It was nice to see the softer side of her once again.

When she'd finally calmed down, she took a deep breath and sat up too. They regarded each other differently now, and Harry found himself letting go of his feelings of betrayal from his friends...at least where she was concerned in this moment.

"I'm sorry..." he said quietly, not knowing how else to start. "I know you really wanted to beat Slytherin."

Angelina shrugged glumly. "I'm a bit glad to be rid of the pressure, to be honest."

"No you're not."

She gave a sly little hint of a smile. "All right I'm not. I'm bloody disappointed and angry at the whole mess. But what can I do?"

"You can fight it. We all could."

"How? What's the risk of kicking up a fuss? Scars like that one for the whole team?" She was serious, and she let her gaze fall pointedly to his hand. Harry felt momentarily uncomfortable as she studied it, shaking her head slowly. "I can't believe she did that to you..." she whispered.

"It doesn't hurt," he lied. He did not want her to know that it was killing him right then, probably just to prove to her that he could handle whatever Umbridge dished out. The expression on her face indicated that she didn't need proof, but rather something else.

"I'll tell you what we could do Harry."

"What?"

"Teach me and the others what you know. Show us how to fight, since you seem to think that's what we should be doing."

"I still don't know about that." He replied carefully, frowning.

"You sounded pretty convinced at the Hog's Head." Her eyes flickered up and down at him appraisingly. "Were you serious then?

“Or was your attitude downstairs in the Great Hall just you puffing out your chest?” She had gazed at him that way before, and the memory of it brought blood rushing to his cheeks along with the slight sting of her words. He hated it when she talked to him like that. She did that a lot. His hand throbbed...

Harry stood up and walked away from her to retrieve his broom, momentarily relieved of her intense gaze. He used the time with his back to her to let the pain in his hand show on his face, since she couldn’t see. He heard her getting up, too, her wet shoes squeaking on the floor. “Just because Hermione decided for me, that doesn’t mean I’m going to do it. Besides, you read that decree—forming the club now would get us expelled.” Harry picked up his broom and turned to face her, only to find that she was merely inches away from him. He felt his cheeks grow hot again and he avoided her eyes, not sure if he were annoyed or embarrassed.

“Oh shut up,” she retorted quietly. “Don’t be afraid of what you’re capable of. You said something needed to be done—so here’s your chance to do it.” Damn it, the way she spoke to him sometimes...

“Why do you talk to me like that?” he asked just as quietly.

Harry was aware of the fact that everything she was saying to him was true, but the way she spoke sounded like an order. She was in her seventh year, he in his fifth; she was older and seemingly more mature; but underneath her authoritative speech lay clear admiration in her voice that made him feel...well...funny. It was funny like falling from a very high place. It was a dip in his stomach; buzzing warmth in his chest.

Angelina shrugged and answered matter-of-factly, “I talk to everyone like that.” He knew that this was both true and false. Somehow he felt that the admiration did not lie underneath for ‘everyone’. He also knew that what happed once before was about to happen again, and he didn’t really know what to do about it. The other time had been a fluke—he’d been sure of it. But now the intent was very clear in her eyes and in the way she stood so close to him. He managed to look at her.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Is that a promise?” Her brown eyes glinted faintly with something...he swallowed.

“Yes.” A beat. “We should get back. Get dry...”

“Uh huh...” her eyelids slid down; she was looking at his lips.

Harry’s nerves stood on edge.

“Try and figure out, um, what to do about the...”

Angelina leaned in as he spoke and kissed him. This wasn’t as brief and spontaneous as the last time. It was not the peck on the mouth that he remembered from last year’s funny little situation. No, Angelina’s lips actually captured his and released—then captured and released—then again—and again; slowly...softly... His hair rose up with the static electricity of the sensation and his Firebolt almost slipped from his throbbing hand. His cheeks burned, his heart pounded in his chest, and by the time he thought to react to her kisses by attempting to capture her soft lips with his own, it was over.

She sighed and stepped back from him.

“I’m angry, Harry.”

“Yeah, me too...” he responded automatically, feeling a little confused by what had just happened. She was moving on from it as if she went around kissing her Seekers all the time; no big deal. She grabbed his hand and he sucked in a breath at the sharp pain the sudden touch created.

“I mean, look at this! She’s marred you!”

“Angelina...”

“We’re going to fight back. Just you wait. She can’t get away with what she’s done.”

With that she turned and began leading him back towards their dormitory, gently holding his hand all the way.

Chapter Two: Swallowing Her Pride

Angelina let go of Harry's hand before they climbed through the portrait hole, but only after the fat lady's raised eyebrow and slightly inquisitive tone as she let them pass.

Harry didn't really know what to say to any one of his team members, who sat still dressed in their soggy Quidditch robes looking beat. The vibe as they stepped into the room felt a little expectant, as though they'd waited for him to return to the common room before going up to bed. It occurred to him as he looked at them all looking at him that perhaps they'd sent Angelina to fetch him. This made him kind of agitated, but he sighed and sat down on a chaise next to Ron. If they were going to complain to him about his temper or his big mouth, he would let them, and then he would tell them all to stuff it. No one really said anything to him, though, and his irritation eased off a little.

"You all right, mate?" Ron asked quietly.

Harry paused for a moment, glancing at Angelina, and nodded his head. "Yeah. Sure. I'm feeling just great."

"Prat..." Ron muttered, nudging him with his elbow. Harry's lips twitched into a smile and he nudged back, unable to help himself from feeling relieved that Ron didn't seem to want to blame him for what was happening.

"Wanker..."

"So what are we going to do?" Katie Bell asked suddenly, and rather impatiently.

"I think the solution is rather simple, actually," Hermione piped up from her position near the fireplace. She was the only one of the whole bunch who had the good sense to use her wand to dry herself. She stood looking as if she hadn't set foot in the rain at all. Harry chalked that up to their low spirits—he himself just didn't feel like drying off. Just sitting there all damp and sad seemed to be the right thing at the moment.

"Oh yeah, Granger?" Fred retorted. "And what's that? We're all ears."

"Well, we simply appeal to her, that's all. I'm sure she's just doing this to gain more control of the school, but that doesn't mean she'll be unreasonable."

"Unreasonable?" Ron snapped. "Look at Harry's hand!" Harry frowned and swept his aching hand away from Ron before he could lift it for everyone to see.

"Well..." Hermione blushed, giving Harry a sympathetic look, and sighed. "She's punished Harry enough—and she's reminded us who's boss, so to speak. I think that's all she wants."

"So we just go and ask her to give us our team back, then?" Harry spoke, rubbing his forehead exhaustedly.

"Well, yeah."

"I'll do it." Angelina spoke up. Her tone was resolute and full of authority. Harry stared at her. Her eyes met his for a split second and then drifted to Hermione. "I'll go and ask her. I'll beg if I have to."

"What? Did you just say we should beg?" Fred gasped.

"Never!" the twins asserted in unison. "We'd rather eat mud; we'd rather sniff Hagrid's farts for all eternity; we'd rather see McGonagall naked than--!"

"Gross..." Ron made a disgusted face before Angelina interrupted the twins' ranting.

"I didn't say we," she told them firmly. "I'm the team captain—the team is my responsibility. I'll do it."

A silence fell over them all as Angelina's decision settled into their minds. Fred and George did not look pleased, and frankly neither did anyone else. But what choice had they? If Hermione was right, all they had to do was swallow their pride and give Umbridge what she wanted: a session of arse-kissing. Harry thought bitterly to himself

that, no, it wouldn't be all they had to do—it would be Angelina. She would have to swallow her pride. He felt guilty for the first time since they read the decree. As Angelina's resolve to take one for the team had let the wind out of the sails of the conversation, nobody else had much to say. Ron stood up after a while and grabbed his broom from its leaning position against the chaise he and Harry were sitting on.

"I'm going to bed. Good luck, Angelina."

Harry watched Ron stalk up the stairs to the boy's rooms, getting the feeling that his best friend was upset about something. His shoulders were slumped and he let his red hair hang in his eyes; he didn't look at anyone as he passed them. Harry knew he should get up and go after him, but the will to do so eluded him for the time being. I'll ask him before I turn in, he thought. After a half hour or so of sitting about; lingering in bitterness over their situation; the others followed Ron's cue and started heading off to bed. Harry sat there still, though, watching Fred and George try to convince Angelina not to beg.

"You shouldn't have to humiliate yourself for the blubbering twat," George was saying.

"Yeah, Angie, she doesn't deserve your--!"

"If that's what I have to do, then that's what I'm doing." Angelina cut Fred off. "If you two are my best mates, then you'll understand that I'm doing this for the team and that's the end of it, savvy?"

Fred clenched his jaw angrily, but nodded that he understood. George looked as if he wanted to argue some more, but at his brother's urging glance, sighed in defeat. "Fine," he muttered, rolling his eyes. "But I'm whipping up some Gassy Goose tonight, just incase."

Angelina made a face. "What the hell is Gassy Goose?"

"It'll make you fart for a week straight. If Umbridge so much as looks at you funny, we'll put it in her tea and then we'll see how much gas that fat arse of hers can handle!"

Angelina's stern expression melted into a huge grin and she hugged George tightly. "Will both of you idiots leave me alone and go to bed already?" She reached up and ruffled Fred's hair, so it looked like an extremely feathery copper-colored hat. He shook it out of his eyes and pulled her hair hard, causing her to yelp in annoyance. Before she could grab him, he laughed at her and dashed out of her reach. George followed his brother up the stairs to the boys' dormitories, chuckling haughtily.

Angelina turned and looked over at Harry, the smile fading slightly from her attractive face. He was about to speak—though truthfully he didn't know if he wanted to ask her to sit next to him or to tell her goodnight—but her eyes traveled up and behind him. "You coming up to bed, Hermione?" she asked, somewhat pointedly.

Harry hadn't realized that Hermione was still standing behind him at the fireplace. He'd been so engrossed in watching Angelina that he didn't notice Hermione hadn't left the room with the others.

"Um, in a minute, thanks." Hermione was standing just over Harry's shoulder, now, but he didn't look up at her. His cheeks were burning for some reason. Angelina nodded goodnight and, without looking at Harry again, made her way up the stairs and out of sight. Hermione sighed and walked around to sit next to Harry in Ron's spot. They didn't speak for a bit. He rested his head on the tip of his broom, which was a little uncomfortable, but he didn't pay much attention.

"Harry, what's wrong?"

"Nothing..."

"Liar, you've scarcely said a word this whole time. Are you still angry?" She sounded a little scared that this might be true, and despite himself he felt that she should be. This malicious thought quickly melted, however. He knew that Hermione didn't really blame him for what Umbridge was doing, despite her tendency to lecture him on controlling his temper.

"I'm not mad anymore. I'm just..." Harry sighed and closed his eyes, unable to articulate his current mood. He was tired, of course, but

beyond his generally low spirits he was still lingering on the moment he and Angelina shared in the hallway. He thought...it was coming to form very slowly...sprouting up from a deep place he hadn't noticed before...but he thought he might feel...something. He wondered if he should tell Hermione about Angelina. He really wanted to confide in Ron, if anyone, but something told him that maybe Hermione could better help him understand his feelings. "I, uh..." Harry turned slightly on the cushion to face her. "I have to tell you something."

"Is it about teaching us defensive spells? Because Harry, I really think you ought to--"

"It's not that," he cut her off. "Actually, I think I might do it." Her face lit up and she made to hug him, but he put a hand up to stop her. "I'll do it, but I'm warning you I don't really know all that much about defensive magic. I mean, I've never taught anyone before, and..."

"Harry, you can do this, I know it! And I'll help you. Just use your experience, that's all. You'll see."

"Right, well...okay then." Harry felt somewhat uncomfortable, as if he'd made the wrong decision, but decided to let it alone for now. They had so much to figure out, anyway—they didn't even know where they were going to hold these secret meetings yet. He cleared his throat and started again. "Hermione...uh...what do you think about Angelina?"

Hermione frowned as if she didn't quite understand the question. "She seems fine enough. Fred and George say she's a great captain. Bit bossy, but...I like her. Why?"

Harry was silent for a moment. He was thinking about the year before. About the Yule Ball or rather, what happened afterwards. Hermione was looking at him inquisitively, her hand touching his arm. "Harry, what is it? You think it's a mistake for her to go to Umbridge? You think..." she paused. "You think you should?"

Harry bristled. "Do you think I should? Is that it?"

"What? No."

"Because it's my fault, right? Because I can't control my temper?" In an instant his temper had risen, ironically proving Hermione's point. She shook her head stiffly.

"Harry, no!" she snapped, her cheeks pinking up in frustration, "That's not what I meant at all. I was simply trying to figure out what you're trying to tell me. But if you're going to be a prat, then good night."

She stood up huffily and marched across the common room and up the stairs to the girls' dorms before he could sputter out an apology. Harry cursed at himself under his breath. He really wished he hadn't reacted so sharply to her now apparently innocent question.

"I like her, too..." he muttered, feeling dejected and even more confused. He was still damp. He was tired. He decided to forget about it for the night and go to bed. As he was crossing the common room for the stairs, he felt a momentary wave of nostalgia. He remembered then that he had stood at the foot of these stairs, watching Angelina go up to bed wearing her Yule gown, her exposed back looking sleek and unsettlingly attractive as she climbed each step almost a year ago. He had felt so young then, though he was going through so much at the time that what happened that night seemed simply to go with the territory. He remembered the next morning having to put up with Ron and Hermione not speaking to each other, and his jealousy of Cho and Cedric, not to mention the fact that he still hadn't figured out the egg clue from the first mission of the Triwizard Tournament.

Harry let the memory carry him up to his bed, where he merely slipped off his Quidditch gear, laid his broom on top of his trunk, and slid into the warm dry sheets. He didn't even bother to take off his glasses, but drifted off to sleep...

The dream was the same each time.

Harry was trying to reach this door. This door at the end of a long hallway. It stood dark and blank, and the desire in him to walk through it propelled him forward with tremendous, urgent force. He began to run. He ran and ran, but it seemed the further he ran, the

further away the door was from his reach. He felt anger and frustration rise up within him as he pumped his legs, and surged on and on and on. He didn't know why he had to get there, but he had to get there!

Harry extended his arm and tried to will it to stretch beyond his normal reach. He panted as he ran, arm stretching, hand grabbing...

He hit the floor with a heavy thud and was instantly jerked awake by the sharp pain in his butt and shoulder from the hardwood. "Damn it!" he grunted angrily, sitting up and rubbing his shoulder. He sighed and straightened his crooked glasses. The skin behind his ears was aching from the pressure of the wire frames. He shouldn't have slept in them, but decided to ignore the pain. He was always in pain, nowadays—a little more wouldn't kill him.

Speaking of pain, his scar was stinging. He reached up to touch his sweaty forehead, rubbing the slightly raised surface of skin that formed a bolt of lightening.

"Blimey, you all right, Harry?" Seamus was looking at him curiously from his sitting position in bed. Harry squinted up at him and shrugged. "Well, what're you doin' down there on the floor in your skivvies?"

"I fell," he muttered, not moving to get up.

"Bad dream again?" Ron asked. Harry turned to see that his best friend was awake. He half-expected Neville and Dean to poke their heads through their drawn curtains to stare at him, such was the trend.

"How did you know I was having them?" He had purposefully not told Ron or Hermione about his dreams because he wanted to try and figure them out first. But it seemed that his best friend knew him too well for that to work.

It was Ron's turn to shrug. "You make noises in your sleep. And, well..." Ron smiled. "You were kind of whimpering like a puppy a minute ago before you fell."

Harry shot up from the floor and tackled Ron, grabbing a pillow and using it to thrash at the scarlet-headed boy. Ron's startled laughter turned into a light-hearted grunt as he seized Harry's arms and tried to force him off. Seamus rose to his knees and cheered them both on, making whooping noises and laughing. Dean woke up, opening his curtains and looking on with a sleepy but amused smile.

"Get off, arsehole!" Ron growled, his smile firmly in place as Harry repeatedly hit him with his own pillow.

"Make me!" Harry blocked Ron's attempt to punch him in the arm and wrapped his legs around the boy's waste to pin him down. Ron rolled his eyes and groaned good-naturedly.

"Ow, Harry! You're heavy; you eat too many—ow!—sweets!"

"Ha, ha, Harry's got a fat arse!" Seamus giggled. Dean chucked a pillow across the room and it hit him in the face. "Hey!"

Neville poked his head from his drawn curtains, rubbing his sleepy eyes. "What's going on?" he asked groggily. The boys all stopped what they were doing and looked at Neville. He blinked. A split second later they were all on him, diving through his curtains and falling on his lanky body in a heap of laughter and pillows.

Ron whacked Seamus across the head with Neville's pillow and gave a hoot, only to be knocked on his back by Harry, whose foot was firmly in Dean's grip. Harry twisted around and hooked Dean in a headlock once he'd freed his foot, and the other boy began punching him in the thigh to get him to release his neck. Harry winced, "Ow! Ow! Ow! Quit it you twat!" while Seamus and Ron took turns hitting poor Neville in the face and torso with his pillow. The boys rolled around for ages until they were all sweaty and laughing at themselves stupidly.

Seamus managed to sit up on his elbows, Neville's leg sliding off of his face. "If any of the girls ever saw this, they'd cluck like hens for sure!"

"I can already hear Hermione..." Harry mumbled, suppressing a chuckle.

Ron blew a lock of hair out of his face. "Don't seem fair that they can get in here, but we can't go up there."

"Yeah...but then again, if any of us did manage to get up there, can you imagine what we'd see?" Dean shivered.

Seamus nodded in agreement. "Girls are scary. Right, Neville?"

They realized then that Neville had fallen asleep again.

When they were dressed and on their way down to breakfast, Ron motioned to Harry that they should lag behind. Harry slowed his pace, and soon they were walking down the stairs a few paces behind Neville, Dean, and Seamus.

"What's up?"

"You really should tell someone about those dreams, you know Harry?"

Harry paused. "I know..." he said, finally. "I wrote to Sirius, but he hasn't answered me yet. I mean...they don't really make much sense to me, though. I want to ask Dumbledore about it, but he's been gone for two days."

"Yeah. Hermione said McGonagall told her he went abroad. Dunno what for, though..." He paused, frowning at his shoes as they walked, before snapping his fingers and looking up again. "D'you think he's on a mission for the Order?"

"Maybe?" Harry shrugged. Something else occurred to him and he frowned at Ron. "What's up with you, then?"

"What d'ya mean?" Ron went back to watching his shoes again.

"You seemed in a bad mood last night. You were kind of..." Harry tried to think of how best to put it. "...sulking."

Ron snorted indignantly. "I was not sulking!" Harry shook his head casually and said nothing. They walked on, jogging down the marble stairs in silence, and when they were almost at the entrance to the Great Hall Ron let out an exasperated sigh. "Well, I mean, I was a bit upset, but I wasn't sulking."

"Okay. You weren't sulking. What were you upset about, then?"

"Practice went terrible, didn't it?" Ron asked as they were entering the Hall. Before Harry could answer, Ron spoke again. "I mean, Angelina was really grinding me. I felt like a giant arse."

"Ron, we were practicing in the middle of a rainstorm. No one could see a thing," Harry offered reassuringly as they took their seats at the Gryffindor table across from Hermione and Ginny.

"Yeah, that's how I felt! But..." Ron's expression soured. "I doubt Angelina thinks of it that way. She's gonna chuck me from the team for sure. That's if we're even allowed to be a team anymore." He shook his red hair into his eyes; his lips pursed grumpily as he reached over to a platter of crisp bacon and removed several pieces for his plate. Harry didn't say anything in response.

"Ron, that's rubbish," Ginny chimed in. "Angelina picked you for a reason. She wouldn't kick you off the team because of one bad practice. I'm sure Harry was terrible when he first started." She grinned at him and scooped up a spoonful of cereal from her bowl.

"Gee thanks, Ginny," Harry said, rolling his eyes good-naturedly. "That helps."

"Harry was brilliant from the start," Ron said, not feeling any better. Harry looked to Hermione for support, but she was reading the Daily Prophet and didn't appear to be listening to the conversation at all. Ron was looking at her expectantly as well, but when she still hadn't spoken, he sighed and reached for a piece of toast. "Let's just drop it, all right?"

“Sure.” Harry began to eat his eggs, feeling somewhat annoyed with Hermione. As he was biting into a piece of bacon he caught sight of Cho Chang and her friend Marietta Edgecombe (whom Harry didn’t really like that much) entering the Great Hall with a bunch of other Ravenclaw students. Their eyes met for a mere second and then Harry noticed also that Angelina was entering with Fred and George. A conflict of the oddest sorts began in him at that moment in time, and he felt a peculiar little lump form in his throat, causing him to put down his bacon and turn away from the sight.

He went through the rest of the breakfast pretending not to see either Angelina or Cho, and thought he might make it out of the Great Hall just the same before Cho came up to him and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Harry, can I talk to you for a second?” He closed his eyes briefly at the sound of her sweet voice and then gestured to Ron and Hermione that they continue to Professor Flitwick’s Charms class without him.

“Sure,” he turned around to face her, only vaguely registering that he could see Angelina looking at him out of the corner of his eye. “What is it?”

She moved closer to him and lowered her voice. He went rigid at the proximity, but waited for her to speak. “Hermione says that you’ve agreed to, you know, teach us Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“Oh. Yeah. Well, I, uh...” Harry sighed. “Yeah. I thought about it. It makes sense, I guess.”

“D’you not want to?” She frowned sweetly at him. She was pretty even when doing that.

“It’s not that, but--I dunno, really. I guess I’m just nervous about so many people depending on me to show them how to do that stuff right. Hermione is the one who usually teaches me stuff.” He was somewhat surprised at his honesty with her about this, but she smiled at him sympathetically and he relaxed about it.

“Listen, I think it’s a great idea. Everyone’s really excited.”

“Really?”

“Aye, and they should be. After all...” Cho blushed a little and Harry found himself staring at the deep, rosy color as it appeared in her soft, creamy skin. “You’re Harry Potter. That’s worth the risk, don’t you think? To learn from Harry Potter?”

It was his turn to blush, but he caught sight of Angelina approaching Delores Umbridge as she was getting up to leave the staff table and his smile faded.

“Cho! We’ll be late for McGonagall, come on!” Marietta was calling from the door.

“Oh, I’d best be going, then.” Cho said half-heartedly. Harry nodded, distracted by what he was seeing, and Cho turned to walk past him. “See you, Harry...”

“Yeah. See you.” Harry couldn’t take his eyes off of Angelina and Umbridge, who were moving into the corridor behind the staff table, talking. Umbridge had that syrupy-sweet smile on her face as usual, and Angelina looked as if she wanted to throw up but Harry could see that she was forcing her own smile firmly into place. He could only imagine what was being said. The humiliation of it all was enough to make him sick, as well. They disappeared into the corridor and Harry turned away, breaking into a jog—he was late for Charms.

Chapter Three: I Fancy You

Harry couldn't get the sight of Angelina and Umbridge out of his head the whole class. Although the lesson was pretty cool; they were learning the opposite of the Summoning charm—instead Banishing an object flying away from them at a target across the room. Still he couldn't focus and as a result he almost hit Professor Flitwik several times with his quill. Finally, he actually did, and the poor little wizard let out a sharp "ouch!" as the quill tip stuck him in the forehead.

Harry winced. "Sorry Professor."

Flitwik pulled the quill out of his flesh and glared over at Harry. "Mr. Potter, will you please pay attention!" he squeaked, sending the quill back to Harry effortlessly with his wand. "The target is that way!"

"Yes sir. Sorry." Harry apologized again and took in a deep breath, trying to concentrate.

By the end of the lesson, he'd managed to hit the target a few times, which redeemed him in Flitwik's eyes. As they were gathering their things, Hermione gave Harry a pointed look. "What was all that about? You usually do pretty well in Charms."

"I saw Angelina talking to Umbridge after breakfast," Harry told her as the three of them left the classroom. "I dunno about the plan we came up with last night, Hermione. I keep getting the feeling it's not going to work. Umbridge is ruthless. You should've seen the look on her face when Angelina went up to her..." He frowned into space, his eyes unfocused, thinking bitterly of his detentions with Umbridge. His hand ached slightly and he flexed it absentmindedly.

"Of course it will work, Harry." Hermione reassured him. "I told you, none of the teachers will stand for it. I'll bet she got loads of complaints. She'll give you guys permission to play," the bushy-haired girl frowned somewhat empathetically and added: "though she'll probably have her fun listening to Angelina plead our case."

"Yell I'll bet she will," Harry grumbled as they walked along side-by-side.

"I'm not that fussed to be honest," Ron muttered, shrugging his shoulders. "If it'll save me another stinking turd of a practice drill, then let her hold out on us all she wants. I dunno why I tried out in the first place..."

"Shut up Ron," Harry retorted. "You tried out because you're good."

Hermione rolled her eyes and ignored Ron. "Look, Angelina knows what she's doing. It'll be fine."

"Well, I guess we're about to find out." Ron gestured ahead of them. Harry saw that Angelina was walking towards them, her eyes fixed on his. He swallowed, expecting her to start yelling at him for not keeping his big mouth shut and his temper in check. "What's the verdict?" Ron asked timidly, his attitude from mere seconds before now vanished and replaced by hopefulness.

To Harry's surprise, Angelina beamed at them. "She said yes. She said she didn't see any reason why the team shouldn't play. She's already reinstated the others!"

"See? I told you!" Hermione exclaimed, laughing. Harry could only grin at Angelina, rather enjoying the look on her pretty face. Ron looked happy, but kind of pale, and though Harry knew that his friend was still worried about being able to carry his weight on the team, he was sure that everything would turn out in Ron's favor soon.

To express this, he reached over and punched Ron in the arm. "Stop fretting, you git. This is good news."

Ron looked embarrassed that Harry had said something in front of Angelina, but smiled and rolled his eyes. "Stuff it, Harry."

"Harry's right, Ron," Angelina said seriously. "It's time to step up your game, mate. We're resuming practices immediately. I just have to talk to the others, but I think I can get the field early tomorrow morning. We need to work on your focus, your reflexes, and..."

She continued talking and Harry could only watch her, feeling an attraction to her stirring within him warmly. She was down to business already, and the ink hadn't even dried on the list of groups that had been approved to reform. Harry could see Filch posting it on a bulletin board in the hall, and was satisfied at the look of irritation on his ragged face.

They were on their free period, and Hermione suggested that the boys use the time to practice for their Transfiguration quiz, but Angelina piped up after she'd headed for Ancient Runes and asked to speak to Harry alone. The feeling of attraction to her grew in intensity as he answered, "Sure." Harry caught the look of puzzlement on Ron's face, but ignored it. "Can I meet you back in the common room?"

"Yeah. I'll go and start, then." Ron hesitated a second, but turned and left them, climbing the marble stairs amid a throng of other students.

Angelina walked along side him out into the back courtyard, not really saying anything. Harry didn't speak either—he assumed she must've been working out what she had to say before she said it, and that was fine by him. He knew that she was probably going to tell him that she shouldn't have kissed him; that he was a kid in his fifth year and she was about to graduate...He imagined her telling him that she thought he and Cho would make a cute couple if he could ever manage the courage to ask her to be his girlfriend. All of this swirled around in his head as they found an empty stone bench under a tree and sat down. The bench was cold, but he ignored it. Angelina still hadn't spoken after several minutes, and Harry used the time to think over his retort. Yeah, he fancied Cho still, but she'd gone out with Cedric, and Cedric was...Harry didn't let the word materialize in his head. Sure, he was only fifteen, and she was seventeen, but he didn't think her being older than him was that big a deal.

He thought back to his various encounters with her in the past, before the night of the Yule Ball.

She had only been his teammate, and a good friend of Fred and George's. He supposed that he may have thought fleetingly once or twice how beautiful she was. He always thought she was funny, and

a damn good player, and an all around cool person. But she had seemed kind of unattainable to him...meaning the possibility of her actually wanting to kiss him had never, ever occurred to him. Yet here they were...

"Harry?"

She startled him out of his thoughts, and he looked over at her. Apparently she'd been talking to him and he'd been so engrossed in his own mind that he hadn't even noticed. "What? Sorry. What were you saying?"

"Um..." Angelina frowned; he assumed out of annoyance; and cleared her throat. "I said that I think I might fancy you."

Harry had not actually expected to hear it. He hadn't prepared himself for that to come out of her mouth. There was an awkward moment in which he was simply at a loss for words. He felt his cheeks growing hot, and saw to his astonishment that she was looking rather flushed herself; her smooth dark skin was glowing slightly. "Oh..." he managed first, and when she raised her eyebrows at him he hastily offered: "I mean I-I, um..." Harry stammered, mentally kicking himself for always being so damned inarticulate at precisely the wrong moments.

"You don't have to say anything." Angelina took a breath and her face became serious again, like a Quidditch captain giving a speech to her team. He waited. "I've decided that telling you was probably the best thing to do, especially with everything that's going on. I don't want you to be confused about my...er...feelings."

"So," Harry couldn't suppress a nervous grin. "You fancy me?"

"Why d'you think I kissed you twice?"

Harry again remembered last year, and the triumph he'd felt at having his first kiss from someone as damned cool as Angelina Johnson. His grin grew wider and he shrugged. "Well, you were kind of rat-arsed drunk on fire whiskey the first time..."

She swatted at him with her notebook and he laughed. “So were you! I handled my drink way better than you did anyway; I seem to recall you giggling like a little girl at some point.”

“That’s done it.” Harry grabbed her and she yelped. They swatted at each other and when he pulled her hair the way he’d seen Fred do it the night before, she chased him around the bench until she caught up with him and began trying to kick him in the shins. Harry grabbed her again and they struggled at arms at bit before their proximity grew tight and his eyes happened to land on her full, soft lips. He felt a spark light in his stomach somewhere and her laughter died off as they stared at each other. He really wanted to kiss her. Angelina’s eyes also flickered down to his mouth, but she only poked him in the stomach, right in his most ticklish spot. Harry laughed so loud in surprise that several students studying or hanging out looked over their way. The two quickly regained their composure and sat down again.

“Hot out here, innit?” Angelina asked, catching her breath. Harry shook his head, though he was a bit warm himself. They both knew it wasn’t from the weather, though. “Well...” she continued. “I guess you’d better go practice for your quiz. Ron’s waiting.”

“Where are you going?”

Angelina shrugged. “I’ll probably sit here and draw up some diagrams or something. Maybe come up with some stuff to practice at the drill tomorrow?” He knew that by ‘probably’ she meant that was exactly what she intended to do. He stood up and grabbed his bag, running a hand through his unruly hair as he backed away from the bench. “See you around?”

“Sure—hey.”

She looked up from her already open notebook and smiled. “Yeah?”

Harry felt that spark ignite again as he backed away slowly. “Well...I do too,” he said quietly. “Fancy you, I mean.”

Angelina looked around to see if anyone heard, and her smile grew wider. "I know."

Chapter Four: Fire Whiskey and the Room of Requirement

Harry hurried along the halls, his brisk walk quickly turning into a light jog. He was smiling from ear to ear and knew he looked ridiculous. A lot of kids were staring at him; some pointing and whispering to each other; but he didn't really care. He had to get to the common room to tell Ron what had just happened. He broke into a full-fledged run by the time he'd climbed the stairs two at a time and reached his floor. He was turning a corner, his hair flopping on his head to the rhythm of his footfalls, when he came to a screeching halt just in front of the portrait of the fat lady.

Delores Umbridge was standing there, waiting for him.

Or perhaps not waiting...she had probably just come from the Gryffindor common room—she was writing something down on that annoying clipboard of hers, and didn't look up until she'd finished. When she did, she smiled at him with that same, appallingly sweet smile, her beady little eyes glinting, her eyebrows raised.

"My, Mister Potter—running in the halls, I see?"

Harry didn't answer. He merely stood there, his chest rising and falling heavily as he caught his breath. He was aware that his gaze on her was less than respectful or polite. He didn't give a damn. Silence was his friend when it concerned this woman, and if he was forced to speak, he knew to say as little as possible.

"Tut-tut; Mister Potter you should be aware by now that running in the halls is dangerous and therefore forbidden. Ten points from Gryffindor." She scratched something on her clipboard, and her iniquitous smile grew even wider, spreading across her toad-like face. Her voice was like acid on his eardrums. "I was just visiting your classmates. Bit of a sloppy bunch, you Gryffindors, aren't you?" She tittered at him. "I was looking for Angelina Johnson. Have you seen her? I'd like a word with her."

"No. I haven't." Harry lied, keeping his face blank.

She raised an eyebrow. "You're sure?"

"Yes."

"I see." For a split second her gaze fell on his hand and he could've sworn they tinkled with some sort of sick pleasure at the damage she'd caused. "Well, that is very interesting, because I've just questioned Ron Weasley and he informed me that she was with you."

Harry shrugged, blinking at her impassively. "He must've been mistaken."

Delores bristled for a second, but recovered and stepped forward, towards Harry. He watched her advance on him and was almost ready to back up to keep the distance between them, but then she stopped a few paces from him. Harry could see the fat lady craning her neck to hear what would be said next. "If you do happen to see her before I can find her, please kindly inform her that as High Inquisitor I will be sitting in on the next few practices of each of the Quidditch teams--"

"Why?" Harry interrupted, unable to stop himself.

Again, Delores's features hardened for the tiniest moment before she smiled again. "Not that it's any of your concern, dear, but your team is under probation until I have seen that you are fit to remain--"

"Probation? But you said we were reinstated. You said we could play--!"

"Mister Potter, do not interrupt me again." Harry let the hot air of his disdain for her come out through his nostrils as he closed his mouth and glared at her. He could only dig his fingernails into the palm of his hand in an effort to stay his outbursts. Umbridge, meanwhile, never lost her frosty smile. "Now...as I was saying: please inform your captain that I will need a schedule of all practice drills for the next week, due before dinner tonight. I will sit in on as many as I like until I've gathered all that I need to judge properly whether or not you can play in Saturday's match."

She blinked at him expectantly and he forced himself to nod in obedience. He really wanted to ask how on earth she planned to attend all of their practices, the other teams' practices, and teach D.A.D.A. at the same time, but knew that she would probably take a thousand more points from Gryffindor before she explained herself to him. Or worse: give another week's detention.

"May I go now?"

"Ahem. 'May I go now...' what?"

Harry gritted his teeth. "May I go now, Professor Umbridge?"

That smile seemed never to cease, and ever to spread. Those eyes seemed to get tinier and tinier, but held so much ominous light in them that they looked like the windows to some fresh hell. "Yes, Mister Potter, you may go. And no running!" She delivered the last remark in a sing-song tone that grated his nerves but he marched past her and muttered the password without looking up.

"What's that you say?" the fat lady asked, unable to hide the amusement at what she'd just witnessed from her voice. Harry raised his head only to glare at her, and she rolled her eyes. "Fine. I was only jibing you a bit, don't be so touchy."

With a huff, she swung forward and he stepped through, virtually all traces of the eager mood he'd been in only minutes before now gone.

Ron was sitting at one of the tables in the center of the room, an expression as ill-tempered as Harry felt firmly set on his freckled face. He seemed to have abandoned their Transfiguration homework, and had settled himself into his chair: shoulders slouched, arms folded.

"Probation?! What a load of dragon dung!" he spat irritably when Harry put his stuff on the table and sat across from him. "You know that puffy wench came in 'ere barking orders and questioning everybody about so-called 'good sportsmanship'?"

"She cornered me outside." Harry responded, pulling out his textbook and sighing. "She's going to sit in on our practices. It's so stupid."

"I mean, has she ever seen a Quidditch match?" Ron demanded, sitting forward in his seat. He was fuming. "You can't be a good sport when a Bludger's been lobbed at your head!"

"I don't think she cares about the rules of the game. She just wants to find any reason there is to keep us from playing. She was breathing down my neck out there." Harry replied darkly.

"Yeah, sorry 'bout that, mate. She wanted to know where Angelina was. Probably to tell her the bad news, I expect. I kind of told her she was with you—she's got a way of making you tell the truth."

"It's okay." Harry smiled half-heartedly. "She doesn't have that affect on me. I told her I hadn't seen Angelina. She can go and find her on her own." Harry remembered Angelina and why he was in such a good mood ten seconds before he'd been put upon by the likes of Delores Umbridge. His smile grew wider and he smacked himself on the forehead, causing Ron to frown in puzzlement. "I just remembered!" he exclaimed excitedly.

"What're you on about?"

"You can't tell anybody. Not even Hermione yet. I tried to tell her last night and it didn't go very well."

"Tell her what?" Ron said this rather grumpily; he was still seething over Umbridge's visit, and was absentmindedly making a balled up piece of parchment float off the table surface with his wand.

Harry regarded him nervously for a minute, unsure if this was the best time. He decided however that there was no time like the present.

"I had my first—well, no, second kiss last night." He paused for effect before adding: "With Angelina Johnson." Harry waited for Ron to react to this news. At first his friend only snorted and continued to play with the floating parchment. Then he blinked and stared at Harry, the parchment falling back to the table, along with the bottom half of his jaw.

"What?" Harry grinned and nodded, opening his book and flipping though the pages until he found the page they were supposed to be studying. He pulled his wand out of his bag and settled himself in his seat; he was letting Ron mull this over for a few seconds before he continued. "Harry—speak." Ron whispered, leaning even further in his seat so that he was inches away from Harry.

"Well, last night..."

"Yeah..."

"When I sort of yelled at you all and went off on my own?"

"Right."

"Angelina followed me."

Harry continued, giving Ron the details about his conversation with the seventh year captain and how she'd taken him by surprise with a lengthy and very nice kiss. Ron hung on his every word, and despite himself he felt a slight air of maturity and coolness as he recounted the tale. He continued, after only a short pause in which Ron shook his head in awe, with the talk he and Angelina had earlier in the courtyard.

"She just said it, just like that?" Ron asked, screwing up his face. "Who just comes out and says 'I fancy you' like that?"

"I know; it was a bit shocking." Harry shrugged, smiling like a dolt. "But then again I'm sure she's had loads of boyfriends. It's probably nothing for her to tell boys how she feels."

"Bloody hell, I wish I could do that." Ron said, his eyes narrowing in thought. Harry frowned, wondering who he'd like to do that to, but decided not to ask just yet. "But I'd probably make an ass of myself..."

"No you wouldn't."

"So, you said it was your second kiss with her?" Ron changed the subject, much more interested in Harry's tale now. "When did the first one happen? And how come you haven't said anything till now?"

"It was last year, and I didn't tell because it wasn't a big deal then." Harry paused, a dark cloud passing his features. "Not with everything that happened..."

"Oh—right. Yeah." Ron looked apologetic, but Harry flicked the parchment into his face and the dark cloud passed. "Bugger off. Tell me what happened. Where was I?"

"Sulking over your row with Hermione, I suppose." Harry shrugged.

"I do not sulk Harry."

"Whatever. It was at the Yule Ball. I went off on my own to get away from your bickering. Remember?"

"Oh yeah...thought you'd gone up to the Owlery or something. Didn't see you when I turned in."

"I just walked. Filch and Mrs. Norris were too busy dancing in the Great Hall."

"I wish I'd been able to enjoy that..."

Harry had been. He smiled coolly and began to recount his adventure with Fred, George, and Angelina. As he spoke, and Ron made indignant noises every now and again, he realized that if he hadn't been worrying about surviving the Tournament he probably would've been all too eager to tell his best friend. But as it happened, Harry had gone to bed that night and had a dream about Voldemort...

At one point during his story Ron punched him hard in the arm. "You had fire whiskey and didn't tell me?"

"Ouch. Sorry—I forgot okay?"

"Well how was it? It got you goofy didn't it?" Ron's grin spread eagerly. "Bill told me it's way stronger than Muggle spirits. He said it only takes one shot--!"

Harry smiled slyly. "Would you just shut up and let me tell the story, you git?"

Ron clamped his mouth shut and nodded. "Sorry. Carry on, then." Harry loosened his bowtie and threw his dress cloak over his shoulder.

He'd been wondering the halls aimlessly for about ten minutes, glad to be away from Hermione's yelling and Ron's stubbornly thick-headed, jealous behavior. He scoffed at himself as he remembered the horrid dancing he'd been forced to do, and at how quickly the Patil sisters had abandoned him and Ron.

"What a silly tradition," he muttered to himself, climbing the steps to the seventh floor for no apparent reason. He'd been shuffling along, deep in thought, when he heard voices ahead of him. They drifted toward him in sharp whispers, a few giggles here and there, but mostly there was a cutting "Shhh!" thrown in every few seconds. Harry slowed down and tiptoed to the corner, where he poked his head around cautiously. Fred, George, and Angelina were in sight, walking around in circles, giggling madly, and arguing. Harry didn't think these three things went together, but that was what they were doing, and he watched them for a moment, fascinated, before stepping around the corner fully.

"I thought you said there was a bloody broom cupboard up here?" Angelina hissed, a silly smile plastered across her relaxed face.

"There was!" the twins retorted in unison. They two were smiling like idiots, and Harry had to wonder what they were up to. "We found it the year before last, didn't we Fred?" George whispered loudly.

"Yeah. Filch was chasing us--we found it right here!"

"Right where?" Angelina squinted at a rather ugly tapestry of a wizard and three big trolls. She stared at it for a moment and giggled absurdly.

"Not there, there!" Fred took her by the shoulders and turned her around to face the opposite wall. It was just a wall, no broom cupboard in sight.

Harry still hadn't been noticed. He spoke. "What d'you want with a broom cupboard, any way?" They all jumped at his voice, and the twins collapsed into a giggle fit two seconds later. Angelina smiled big and opened her arms to him, walking rather haltingly towards where he stood. He stared at her, and finally realized why they were all acting so silly—they were sloshed. "You guys are so lucky Filch and Mrs. Norris are having such a good time downstairs," he said, having to catch Angelina as she stumbled into him. "If he caught you like this..."

"Shhh, Harry. You'll give us bad luck talking like that." Angelina put a finger to his lips and giggled again. "B'sides, we're supposed to be in hiding, if these two knobs can find the spot where they left their broom cupboard."

"Sod off, Johnson!" the twins sang. Fred pulled a bottle from his pocket that shimmered with golden liquid contents and took a swig. Harry watched the two brothers help each other up and walk towards he and Angelina, suppressing a laugh at their expense. Angelina was getting comfortable; he hoisted her upright, having to wrap both arms around her narrow waist to support her. She seemed to be totally opposed to standing on her own.

"They are too stupid to find it, you see Harry?" Angelina shook her head at them as they sang 'Sod off Johnson' to themselves, taking care to over-emphasize the last syllable of her name.

"Maybe this is the wrong floor?" Harry suggested, eyeing the bottle of what he was sure was fire whiskey in Fred's hand. He was a bit anxious to get them all, not to mention that bottle, out of sight before they were in big trouble. "Did you try a floor down?"

"No, no, lad, this hideous thing we remember." George said sloppily, gesturing to the tapestry.

Harry wondered why they just didn't find an empty classroom instead, but didn't say anything. He really wanted to leave them to find the bloody thing themselves, but Angelina was quite comfy; her arms were around his neck and she was leaning against him casually. He had never really been that close to her before, and he mentally registered the smoothness of her warm skin against his hands. The gown she wore had an exposed back, and as he was supporting some of her weight (this was difficult; she was taller than him, but he didn't complain), his hands found skin quite easily.

"Actually, it's rather amusing just watching them try and find it," she whispered to him. He looked at her. Her eyes were glazed slightly, but she seemed to be a tad more sober than them. "I don't think they've ever set foot on this floor, but if it serves to entertain us—let them look I say."

"Yeah, but what if we get caught?"

She shrugged. "I don't think we will. I can still hear the music from down there."

Harry listened. Indeed, the Weird Sisters were still rocking the night away, and he smiled to himself. Relaxing a little, he turned with Angelina to watch Fred and George pace awkwardly back and forth.

"We can't just sit out here in the open," Fred mused. "We need a place to finish this baby off." He beamed as he held up the bottle of whiskey. "And you're helping us, Potter. No choice now, lad."

Harry blanched at the sight of it, gleaming naughtily in the candlelight of the hallway. "No way."

"Oh yes." George goaded. "All we need is a place to cop a squat, and then we're getting you pissin' drunk, mate."

"Well, can't we go off grounds or something? Honestly, let's not stand here forever." Harry conceded, his paranoia about Filch rising up again.

"Rubbish, we can't go outside. Angelina's gown will be ruined in the snow."

Angelina made an obscene hand gesture and shook her head.
"Where d'you suggest, then?"

"I told ya, we just need to find somewhere up here, and we can--"

"Aha!" Fred piped up all of a sudden. "I found it!"

They all stared at him in disbelief, but sure enough there was a door there. George did a double-take, his eyebrows raised in puzzlement, but Fred chuckled, evidently quite pleased with himself. Angelina stood up straight and walked over to join the boys with Harry following closely. He felt nervous, and didn't think it was such a good idea for the four of them to try and squeeze into a broom cupboard—especially since three of them were smashed. He looked around them warily, ready for Filch or McGonagall or even Dumbledore to pop out at any moment and expel them all.

"Squeeze in, squeeze in," Fred pushed him into the open doorway. It was dark in there, and Harry pulled out his wand for light. "There's a good lad, come on."

"Lumos," Harry muttered. A second later cool light emanated from his wand tip and he squinted up at all of them as Fred joined them and closed the door behind him. Harry expected them all to have to push against each other, fighting for room...something he kind of secretly looked forward to though, even if he did happen to accidentally brush up against Angelina...but to his surprise there was way more room in there than he'd thought. He backed up, holding his wand aloft as he looked around them, and a second later he bumped into something hard. It was round and only came up to his butt. He turned around and shined the wand tip over it—it was a table.

"Hey, look at this."

"Lumos," all three sixth-years illuminated their wands and held them up as they turned to look at the table. "What the--?" Fred muttered, baffled. Not only was there room for a table in this rather large broom cupboard, but there were also exactly four chairs sitting around it. In the center of the table sat four small glasses, perfectly sized for single shots of fire whiskey. Harry gaped at this, quite taken aback. He looked at the twins, who shrugged and smiled. "Maybe Filch uses it for getting pissed with his mates."

"Filch doesn't have any mates, idiot," Angelina rolled her eyes. "Are there candles?"

Harry could tell that this was merely an offhand comment, because she didn't attempt to look for any. But Fred leaned forward suddenly and seized four candlesticks from a small shelf that Harry hadn't noticed before. They all stared as Fred lit the candles with his wand. He muttered a charm to make them levitate above the table and then sighed, satisfied with himself thoroughly.

"After you, m'lady." George pulled a chair out for Angelina. She curtsied and sat down. He pushed Harry into the seat next to hers and he and his brother sat down across from them.

They let their wands go out and Harry marveled at the perfect-ness of it all. He was slightly worried about someone discovering them in there, but somehow knew that no one would.

"Okay, first shot's yours, mate." Harry's thoughts were interrupted by Fred's rather excited voice. He poured a shot of fire whiskey from the bottle he had into one of the little cups and held it out to Harry. "Don't be afraid of her."

Harry made a face, his eyes flickering towards Angelina for a split second. She was smiling at him, her elbows on the table, and her chin in her hands. Her eyes twinkled in the candlelight.

"Um...where did you get this?" he asked, taking the shot glass with hesitation.

Fred shrugged indifferently. "Nicked it from Filch's office, of course."

"I dunno about this..."

"Oh come on, Potter, don't be a girl." George urged.

"Hey!"

"What?" George lifted his hands innocently as if he'd done no wrong.
"You're not a girl, you're Angelina."

"Maybe we shouldn't make him drink it. He's only a fourth year. It might kill him or something," Angelina commented, frowning appraisingly at Harry.

"Hey..." It was his turn to be indignant. Angelina smiled. "I may only be a fourth year, but I am a Triwizard champion."

"Oh-ho! What d'you say to that, Johnson?" Fred needled her, enjoying this.

Angelina looked at Harry funny for a second, and then her smirk grew.
"Pour me a shot."

The twins drummed their fists on the table top eagerly. Harry wanted to tell them to be quiet or they'd be hung for sure, but he was rather amused by it. Fred poured a shot for Angelina. She reached over for it, her hand brushing his slightly, and lifted it in toast. "On three, Potter."

"Go, Potter!" the twins sang.

"Okay." He swallowed, putting on a poker face for her.

Their eyes met and locked, and they lifted their glasses to their lips.

"One," she whispered.

"Two," he countered.

"Three!" the twins finished. Harry squeezed his eyes shut and drank. The liquid slid down his throat, burning a path through it to his chest and into his stomach. It hurt but it felt damned good too, and he could feel that even the saliva in his mouth seemed to be on fire.

"Ohhgrhhh!" Harry shook his head to and fro several times, coughing and sucking in his breath as the whiskey did its work. Opening his eyes, he found the three of them falling over with laughter at his expense, and he lifted his arms in triumph. "How was that, then?"

"Brilliant, mate!" Fred and George clapped for him, their backs straight and noses in the air as if they were applauding for royalty.

"That was pretty good, Potter." Angelina reached over and ruffled his hair, rather like a grownup would a kid, and it made him feel funny. Not mad exactly...just...he reached over and took the bottle from Fred. He had something to prove.

"Only teachers call me Potter," he told her, pouring whiskey in all four glasses. "Usually the tetchy ones."

Angelina's gaze stayed on him as he poured, and when he handed her a glass she took it without saying anything. Fred and George were quiet too, though they smiled at what was happening. No doubt they were proud that they'd corrupted Harry, which had been a secret goal of theirs forever. Their biggest mission was to conquer Hermione Granger, of course, but they still had a long way to go with that one.

"On three..."

One—two—three. They all took their shots. Harry experienced the uncomfortable burning sensation as it traveled through his body again, but this time held his own. He blew out his burning excitement and felt the lightheadedness that came along with one's second shot of fire whiskey almost immediately. He giggled without warning and clamped his hand over his mouth, suppressing the fit of laughter he was experiencing for no apparent reason at all.

"Ha ha, Harry's got it!" Fred pointed at him.

“Got what?” Harry giggled again.

“We’ll tell you when you’re older, mate. Drink up!”

They did two—three—four more shots a piece and soon were all so encumbered with unprovoked laughter that Harry had tears in his eyes. He reached over and flicked a lock of Angelina’s shining black hair into her eyes and she swiped his glasses from his face. The twins were singing some old pub song quietly as Harry reached over to retrieve his glasses. Angelina held them above her head and wouldn’t let him near them from his sitting position. Finally, he got up from his chair and grabbed them from her, lost his footing and sloppily fell over, knocking her out of her chair. They fell to the floor in a heap.

The twins stopped singing long enough to laugh at them, but soon resumed their song.

“Old Henry, old Henry, he poured us some rum!

Like he does every evening when our chores are done!

The trolls scratch their arses, the dragons all cry!”

Fred stopped his brother. “Not dragons, you idiot! There’re no bloody dragons in the song!”

Whilst the twins argued amongst themselves as to the lyrics of the old song, Angelina and Harry sat on the floor together, smiling up at them.

“What d’you reckon it is?” Angelina turned to him.

Harry shrugged. “I can’t imagine dragons crying. It sounds to me like they’re making it up as they go along...”

They regarded each other silently for a moment and then Angelina reached up and touched his forehead. Harry stiffened at this, but waited while she moved her fingers along his skin. He knew what she was feeling for, and when she found it he watched her bite her lip and smile. He smiled back. “Sorry,” she said, her fingers lingering for just

a bit before she pulled them away. "I've sort of always wanted to touch it."

"You're not the first..." He wondered if that sounded a bit smug. Intoxicated as he was, he could not tell at all. She didn't seem to notice, however, and she remained sitting there staring at him as if he were suddenly real to her.

"That must be bloody annoying."

"Sometimes." He watched her, and then added: "But not with you. I don't mind if you touch my scar."

He was surprised at himself—very surprised. He didn't recall ever seeing Angelina the way he was seeing her now. The candlelight illuminated her face quite beautifully. Harry had had so much trouble with girls over the past few weeks; he was floundering in the murky waters of his crush on Cho Chang, and finding dates for himself and Ron for the Yule Ball was a nightmare. This seemed different somehow. Of course, it could've just been the fire whiskey, but he felt very relaxed around her. She was extremely easy to talk to, and beyond his general confusion over what he actually felt when he looked at her, Harry was slowly realizing that he had never really looked at her before now.

"You know, I think Cho Chang fancies you," she said, out of the blue.

Harry frowned. "How can you tell?"

"She kept her eyes on you quite a bit tonight." Harry didn't believe her. She smirked and ruffled his hair again—she liked doing that to people, he noticed. "Trust me, girls know these things."

"She's with Cedric," Harry said with a little too much finality. He didn't really feel that hopeless about it, but at the moment he didn't wish to be talking about his failure with Cho. "I don't think she likes me that way."

"You'd be surprised, Harry..."

"Oi, get it right, you knob!" Fred hissed at George. "No dragons!"

"But you can't tell me what it is instead, can you, troll breath?" George retorted. A pause. They resumed their singing.

Angelina chuckled at them. She shivered suddenly and reached up to hug herself. "Cold down here on this floor." She frowned at their surroundings, her eyes leaving his face to study the floor. "And dusty...I'll bet my dress is ruined."

"You want to get up?"

"Nah." She looked up and shrugged. Harry watched her shiver again, and then realized that he should do something about that. He reached over and retrieved his dress cloak from where he'd draped it over the back of his chair. Angelina smiled gratefully as he wrapped it around her shoulders. "Thanks."

"No problem."

"You're a little gentleman." It irked him somewhat to hear her use the word 'little' concerning him, as it had when she called him 'only a fourth-year.' Again, he felt he had something to prove to her, though he didn't know what or how he would. Or why, for that matter. "You know..." she leaned in closer and lowered her voice to a mischievous whisper. "Don't tell Fred and George—I told them odds were for Cedric—but I think you could really win this thing, Harry."

"I doubt it. I haven't even figured out the second task yet," he said honestly.

"You will."

"It's in two days."

"Don't worry."

Harry didn't say anything. He was looking around at the space they were in. Through the haze of his drunkenness, he pondered how convenient it had been for them: the table with four chairs, the

candles, and the shot glasses...It seemed quite unlikely that Filch used this room for anything, let alone knew of its existence. He wondered how long it had been here. Who used it? And how come it took them so long to notice it was there? Fred and George had fallen asleep on each other's shoulders, the song forgotten and the whiskey bottle overturned on the table. The tiny amount of drink left had spilled out and made a funny shape on the surface.

"They're done in. We'd better go." Harry looked back at Angelina, prepared to help her up so they could wake the twins and leave.

"Okay..." she stared at him for a long moment, an odd look on her face, and then leaned over and pecked him on the mouth. The sensation of her soft skin pressing on his and then gently peeling away caused a shudder to go through him and he grew suddenly very hot. He knew he was blushing; she grinned and stood up. "You're cute."

That was it. Harry sat there taken aback for only a second, and then they were waking the twins and preparing to leave. Angelina muttered an incantation, and the bottle of whiskey disappeared.

They each took a twin, supporting their weight, as they cautiously left the small room and made their way back to the Tower. They saw no teachers at first, but plenty of students returning from the Great Hall. Most of the girls carried their shoes in their hands, the boys their cloaks over their shoulders. Some looked at them curiously, to which Harry muttered something about too much cake. "Stomach aches...." No one really bought it, but no one really cared either. Thankfully, they did not see Malfoy or Filch anywhere.

They did spot Moody from a distance, but he only raised a knowing eyebrow at them and limped off in another direction.

When they made it to the common room, the twins had somewhat recovered from their sluggishness and thanked Harry for helping them. "Put a little hair on your chest, eh Potter?" Fred winked at him as he made his way towards the boy's dorms.

Harry blinked lazily and grinned. "You could say that. Thanks."

"No worries, mate. We won't tell. Granger would have our hides for it."

Harry shuddered as he imagined the look on Hermione's face if she ever found out what he'd just done, and decided never to tell her. Or at least not for a long time. The twins waved goodnight and went up to bed. Harry turned to Angelina, who was taking off his cape and handing it to him. He accepted it, throwing it over his shoulder again and preparing to say goodnight. Without warning, Angelina pecked him on the cheek.

"Goodnight, Harry."

Harry touched his fingers to his skin where she'd kissed him and nodded. "Yeah—goodnight." Angelina turned and began to climb the stairs to the girls' dorms. Harry piped up suddenly, unable to suppress his next statement. "Hey, Angelina?" She turned. "Just you looked, um...well you looked really nice tonight. Your gown isn't ruined."

"Thanks."

And with a smile she disappeared upstairs. Harry stared after her for a while, and when he finally snapped out of it Hermione was making her way through the portrait hole, looking rather enchanted. "Lovely night, wasn't it?" she asked breezily, sweeping past him in the direction Angelina had just gone.

"Yeah..."

He guessed that even fighting with Ron could not dampen her spirits and good for her. Harry grinned, said good night, and went to bed.

Chapter Five: Behaving Like A Girl

Angelina watched as Harry turned around and walked away; taking special notice of the way the sunlight caught his disheveled hair in some places. The boy was hopeless when it came to the thick black mass that sat atop his head, but it was something that Angelina always rather liked about him. That and the fact that he had crimson lips at times. He was oft prone to licking them when nervous. Or upset. Or thoughtful. Or all three. Those lips echoed the scarlet of his cheeks, which were offset by the smooth ivory of his skin.

But it was Harry's hair that really did it for her. He never combed his hair. Or did he? She didn't know. He seemed never to, though, because it was always as if he had just woken from a rough night every time she saw him. It was jet black; a startling contrast to the ivory and scarlet; and wild on his head. Shiny, too, like raven feathers.

Why did she notice?

She made a face, her eyes falling to the empty parchment on her lap. She liked him. What a strange and wonderful idea.

As she began drawing diagrams of some of the plays she wanted to work on with the team, her mind wondered cheerily through the stages of her gradual acceptance of such a fancy. What else was there?

Green eyes. When had she noticed those? They were emerald green, though she couldn't remember when she had ever taken the time to look behind those ridiculous round frames at the brilliance of that color staring back at her. She noticed his hands, too. How strong they were. Not necessarily in appearance, but in the way he used them. Long, slender fingers didn't automatically denote strength, but Harry held his wand like it was an extension of himself.

It had always seemed to her, from the first time she ever met him, that Harry was no ordinary kid. Aside from being one of the most recognized faces in the Wizarding World, Harry was so extraordinary on so many levels it was hard to know where to begin. Angelina smiled to herself, thinking that maybe she could have a go at it.

For starters, he was an excellent Quidditch player.

This impressed her first. More than once, she'd watched him during practice drills and matches, always charmed by his ability to maneuver on his broom. He was such a gifted flyer that he even made her look more well-practiced than naturally talented. Angelina unconsciously stopped sketching maneuvers and began doodling little flying Harry's. She drew a Flying Harry swooping in to grab the Snitch just before he narrowly avoided colliding with one of the Gryffindor bleacher towers. Below that, there was a Flying Harry hanging from his broom upside down by the legs, his hand closing around the little golden ball and his black hair sticking out in all directions. This amused her and she drew a huge grin on his face. He grinned and waved, almost falling from the broom, but recovered himself and swung to and fro with the Snitch fluttering in his hand.

Another doodle found Flying Harry rolling across the Quidditch pitch as two rogue Bludgers attempted to pummel him.

"You're a tough little bean, aren't you Harry?" Angelina had said to him while visiting him in the hospital wing after that incident. The poor thing had been victimized by not only two bewitched Bludgers, but also Gilderoy Lockhart's nuisance of a healing spell that made all the bones in his arm disappear.

Harry had frowned at her, his eyes narrowing the way they always did when Angelina used that tone with him. She knew of course that he didn't like her talking to him that way, and that was partially why she did it. She couldn't help jibing him a bit when he was so keen to be taken seriously. She did take him seriously.

"It doesn't hurt," he said simply. He always said that. He had his arm broken and then all the bones in it removed. Angelina suspected that it had hurt quite a bit, but didn't argue the point.

"I expect you'll be singing a different tune when they start to grow back, mate," she'd told him instead. "Pomfrey says its dreadful stuff, re-growing bones."

Angelina always regretted not being able to say more than the occasional few words to him. They were teammates, sure, but other than their connection through Quidditch, Fred, and George, she always felt very removed from him. Everyone knew that something was going on when those Bludgers went nuts, but of course all the speculation in the world never ever really pinpointed the truth about the situations Harry always found himself the center of.

Last year, when Harry had mysteriously been entered into the tournament she, like everyone else, had suspected him of cheating. But Fred and George quickly put an end to that theory by assuring her that if he had he would've needed help and they couldn't see him going to anyone else for that besides themselves. "Anyway," Fred had reasoned at lunch one day after Harry's fight with the dragon, "I can't see the kid wanting to get mutilated. He's always sort of sucked into the stuff that happens to him. Sad, really."

She had always been right on the cusp, getting most of her information from Fred and George, who though thoughtful and respectful for the most part, always found something amusing about Harry's troubles. Except last year they felt rather guilty, she knew, about taking bets on who would survive the tournament. That Cedric died wasn't their fault, she'd tried to assure them, but they still hadn't gotten over it. Neither had she, really. Even though they were on opposite teams and in competing houses, Angelina had always had a lot of respect for Cedric Diggory. She remembered talking to him about the tournament; about putting their names into the Goblet of Fire. Both of them had been rather nervous and excited, and Cedric had almost changed his mind.

"I'm sure I won't be chosen, any way," he had mused thoughtfully as they walked through the halls. "I'm just a Quidditch player; nothing special."

"You're a damned good Quidditch player." Angelina had quickly pointed out, recalling a few close calls at the Gryffindor/Hufflepuff matches, when Cedric had given Harry a good run for his money. "If I were captain and you weren't a Hufflepuff, I'd have you on my team."

He had laughed at her statement as if it were a ridiculous thing to say.

"But why would you want me as your Seeker when you've got the famous Harry Potter?"

She hadn't had an answer for that. "You'll put your name in. And so will I, deal? May the best man win."

Poor Cedric wasn't Seeker for Hufflepuff anymore. He was gone. Angelina sighed forlornly. Watching Harry cling to a lifeless Cedric in the middle of the entire student body had been quite the shock. She had been hit hard by Harry's sorrowful utterances "...he asked me to bring him back...I couldn't leave him!" and the stark realization that Cedric was dead. She had only once seen a dead person, and it was at a ceremony for her late grandfather. Though everyone had their share of grief and confusion over what happened, Angelina could only imagine what Harry had been going through. She remembered that between the time of all the activity surrounding the mysterious goings on at the maze task and the last day of school, she had seen Harry changed. He was detached and despondent...always cast off in his own thoughts. He stayed close to his two best mates, Ron and Hermione at all times, though he didn't say much to them either. She had always really wanted to speak to him, though she had never officially made up her mind about what she would say if given the chance. It was this notion coupled with an overwhelming need to understand him that had ultimately led to her strongest inklings of a desire for him beyond friendship.

Before that horrible time, though, was the rather good time she'd had with him at the Yule Ball.

Before that Angelina had experienced nothing but friendly fondness for Harry, coupled with the occasional appreciation for his cleverness at the least expected moments, and rightly so. She had seen other girls eyeing him bemoanedly at the ball; including Cho Chang. Fred spun her around at one point and dipped her, and out of the corner of her eye she could see Harry trying desperately to figure out what he was doing wrong as Pavarti Patil sucked in her breath for the fifth time at having him trample all over her foot. She had pointed this out to Fred just as George showed up with spiked pumpkin juice.

Angelina's mind was wandering and she had stopped paying attention. The Flying Harry's were zooming all over her parchment, seemingly carrying out the diagrams she'd started for the practice drill. Frowning, she turned to a clean sheet of parchment in her notebook and began another drawing. This one sort of developed itself, and she felt her sketch hand moving across the surface as she thought about Harry's face.

By the time he'd discovered them trying to find that broom cupboard on the seventh floor, she'd had a good few rounds of the fire whiskey/pumpkin juice cocktail that George had mixed up. Brilliantly daft idea, that was, she thought to herself. The twins had such the uncanny ability to do the most devious things right under the noses of the authorities.

She had been silly-intoxicated, and she remembered Harry watching her approach him with a look of polite scrutiny. She supposed that seeing his teammate, especially one as consistently demanding and hard-working as she was, so madly oblivious and giddy was a bit of a shock for him. But, truth be told, it was the effects of the cocktail that made her forget to be self-conscious, and she found talking to Harry then quite easy when she had not before. Hanging on him loosely and allowing herself to be closer to him than she'd ever been was somehow okay, and she had enjoyed it.

Everything seemed so easy-going and light-hearted. She was surprised at how easy he gave in to the twins when they cajoled him into joining them in the ridiculous broom cupboard. Surprised and impressed. Angelina mused that if she had not been full of whiskey that she would not have spoken so freely or let her budding attraction to the then fourth year boy show quite so obviously.

Angelina sighed and filled in the ovals of one of Harry's irises on the parchment. He had looked at her quite intently when she said he was 'only a fourth year.' And as much as it served to intensify her rapidly increasing fascination with him, that look was one-upped by the tone of casual wickedness he used when he said that only teachers called him 'Potter.' Of course, by the end of four more rounds of whiskey, she felt so at ease and comfortable around him that the secret desire she'd had for ages to touch his scar manifested itself in the gentle

contact of her fingers against his soft skin. "I don't mind if you touch my scar..." Well after that statement, coupled with his lazy yet all-consuming gaze on her, she had to kiss him.

Fred had given her a nice little taunting for that later on, and of course this served to make her more cautious about her actions towards Harry up until this point.

"I saw you, you know, Angie..." Fred had said to her casually the next evening when they were studying together.

"What d'you mean? Saw me what?"

"You kissed Harry."

"I...wha--?" She couldn't really think of how to protest this, and she knew she had a stupid smile on her lips, despite her efforts to look affronted. Fred simply smirked and turned a page in his textbook, not really reading she knew, but waiting for her to sputter out a response to his accusation of girly activity. "I didn't kiss him, really..." She got out finally. "It was just a peck. He's a cute kid."

"Just a peck? D'you kiss your mum like that, then?"

She swatted at him and he chuckled evilly, still keeping his eyes on his textbook.

He hadn't officially mentioned it again for a long time after that. There were always knowing looks he threw at her every now and again when the subject of Harry came up amongst their classmates or Harry was around and Fred would catch her staring at him.

For that matter, Harry didn't mention it again either. Angelina couldn't pretend that his silence on the matter didn't bother her a bit, but she assumed that after everything that had happened and everything the boy had gone through that year he had simply forgotten about it. She convinced herself that she should forget too; that what had happened wasn't significant. It was as she'd told Fred: just a peck. A very nice...warm...soft...peck.

Harry's stoic yet passionate manner of dealing with the general public's disbelief of his claim that Voldemort was back and had murdered Cedric was what had brought all of these feelings forth again. Seeing him repeatedly confronted with the likes of Draco Malfoy and Delores Umbridge gave Angelina a truer sense of the boy's courage than imagining what it must've been like to come face to face with the Dark Lord. Angelina was willing to bet that she was more excited than anyone about Harry agreeing to teach the secret defense classes. She looked forward to these almost as much as beating Slytherin at the next Quidditch match.

Quidditch. Yes, she'd better stop daydreaming and get to work on some strategy or she could forget about winning matches.

Angelina looked down at her parchment. She had drawn a picture of she and Harry kissing next to the unfinished one of Harry's face. A shrill giggle escaped her before she could help it and she thanked Merlin that Fred and George weren't around to see her behaving like such a girl.

There was, however, one quite uninvited witness, who had been sneakily peering over her shoulder at what she'd been drawing for several minutes now. Angelina would later scold herself terribly for allowing her mind to wander and not paying attention to her surroundings. Her spy scoffed haughtily.

"Well, well, Johnson. Seems your team's got bigger problems this year than not being fit to set foot on a Quidditch pitch."

Angelina jumped up and spun around sharply to face Draco Malfoy, who merely smiled crassly and rested his foot on the bench where she'd been sitting seconds before. Before she could give him a good tongue lashing for butting into her privacy, he reached out and snatched the notebook from her quick as a flash.

"Hey--!" She grabbed for it, but he held it beyond her reach, sneering like a blond-haired rat.

"Have a bit of a thing for Potter, do you?" He taunted, flipping through the pages of the notebook casually as she fumed before him. "For someone who comes from one of the better wizarding families, you don't waste time mixing it up with filth like that ugly Mudblood Granger or the Weasels, but kissing Potter? That's a prime offense, Johnson."

Angelina tried to quell her rage, reaching out a steady hand and motioning for him to give her back her property. "Hand it over, Malfoy. Now. Or so help me, I'll--"

"You'll what?" He made as if he was going to give it back, but snatched it away again before she could grasp it. "Jinx me? Curse me?"

"Give it back!" Angelina reached into the folds of her robes and pulled out her wand, pointing it at his face, her temples burning.

Draco's sneer turned into an amused smile and he looked down at the notebook again thoughtfully. After a beat in which she thought he would stow it away for himself, he shrugged and tossed it lazily on the bench next to his foot. Angelina stared at him menacingly for several seconds before tucking her wand away again and picking the notebook up.

"Doesn't matter." He said as if he could care less about what he'd just found. "Even if I don't tell Umbridge the only reason Pottybreath is still on the team is because his so-called 'captain' fancies him, you Gryffindors are finished."

"Stuff it, Draco. Umbridge gave me permission to reform the team this morning," Angelina smiled triumphantly, even though she was still quite shaken by what he had seen her drawing, and tried not to let it come out in her voice. "We'll be seeing you on the pitch next Saturday."

Draco snorted and shook his head at her as if she didn't have a clue.

"A bit slow on the uptake, aren't you Johnson? Yeah, I suppose Umbridge had to let you think you were in the clear...but really she

just did that to shut your Head of House up. McGonagall quacked like an injured duck about the decree.”

“What are you on about, you little twerp?” Angelina snapped impatiently, the unsettling feeling of dread suddenly coming over her.

“Oh nothing...” Draco began to examine his fingernails, clearly enjoying having the upper hand. “You’ll find out when Professor Umbridge gets hold of you. She’s been looking for you, you know. I volunteered to help find you.”

“Spit it out!” She was getting more and more anxious, and was two seconds from drawing her wand again.

“Oh, there you are, Miss Johnson!” she heard a syrupy sweet voice calling to her. Delores Umbridge was making her way across the courtyard, her clipboard clasped firmly at her bosom. “Malfoy I see you’ve found her for me. How kind of you.”

“Not at all, Professor,” Draco composed his features to resemble what Angelina could only guess was politeness. “We were just chatting a bit about Quidditch.” He lied with such ease that it made Angelina clench her fists, but she said nothing.

“Oh?” Umbridge raised a sharp eyebrow. “Well that is exactly what I’ve come to discuss with you Angelina.”

Angelina swallowed, ignoring the smirk playing on Draco’s lips. “What about, Professor?” she asked rather meekly. “We can still play....? Can’t we?”

“Well,” Umbridge began unsympathetically, “I’m afraid there are conditions to your team’s eligibility to reform...”

That feeling of dread swelled in Angelina’s chest and she felt like punching something, but Umbridge dismissed Malfoy and began to explain that she hadn’t had a chance to tell Angelina everything at breakfast. She explained that she had decided to take steps to ensure that the Quidditch season this year upheld ‘Ministry Standards of Conduct and Good Sportsmanship.’ Angelina couldn’t believe her

ears. She thought hard about what Umbridge had said to her only that morning and could've sworn that none of this was even hinted at. And there was the list that Filch had posted...where was this coming from? Umbridge didn't seem to give a damn about the young woman's confusion. The more the short, plump, wicked teacher spoke, the angrier and more depressed the Gryffindor captain became. By the end of the conversation Umbridge walked away quite pleased with herself, taking a giant chunk of Angelina's good mood with her.

Chapter Six: Rumor Has It

Harry and Ron were supposed to be practicing their Vanishing spell work during their free period. Harry mused that if he had been able to see into the future, he would've asked Angelina to show him how to do it when she made the bottle of fire whiskey disappear. Instead of making much progress however, they spent the whole time talking about Harry's becoming a man.

"Don't be such a knob, it was only a kiss." Harry was saying as he tried and failed to make the balled up piece of parchment Ron had been playing with disappear. "Evanesco." he muttered, but the parchment only shivered a little and stayed completely visible.

Even though he dismissed Ron's gushing, he admitted to himself silently that he was really quite pleased as well, and even more excited than Ron. The prospect of an older girl being interested in him simply had not ever entered his mind; especially since he was having so much trouble with the girls his own age, and hadn't really begun to figure out how to deal with them yet. As cool as it was, though, it was also quite nerve-wracking. He had no idea what to do next.

"Listen mate, I hate to break it to you, but you're a fifth year who kissed a seventh year and it was Angelina Johnson to boot. That's a big deal!" Ron tapped the parchment harshly, sending it flying off the table before he could even say the incantation.

Harry got up and retrieved it from the floor, sitting down again with a sigh. "I mean...I like her...but I'm kind of--"

"Kind of what?" Hermione had appeared, her arms laden with library books. Harry gave Ron a look warning him not to say anything and watched as she hauled the books over to an empty chair and deposited them there. She pulled it over to their table and sat down next to it, smiling curiously at the boys. "What're you two chatting about?"

"We're stuck," Harry offered quickly. "I can't get this stupid parchment to vanish properly."

Hermione sighed patiently. "It's all in wrist movement and pronunciation, Harry. Like this." She tapped the parchment smartly, turned her wrist slightly, and uttered: "Evanesco..." The parchment vanished. "See? Now you try it, Ronald."

As Ron was trying half-heartedly to make the parchment vanish, Hermione furrowed her brow at Harry. "You know, I didn't mention it because you were so defensive the other night, but with Umbridge's new decree, we're now officially an illegal club," she said, referring to her idea about Harry teaching defense classes. "I mean, if you're still going to do it, that is."

Harry shrugged. "I sort figured that already. Any way it wasn't exactly something we could've posted up flyers for, Hermione. What difference does it make, now?"

"So...you still want to do it, then?" she asked hopefully.

"Sure. Why not?"

"Good! I've already told the others." Hermione told him happily.

He marveled at how she'd managed to find the time, but then again it was Hermione.

"I gathered as much. Cho mentioned it to me at breakfast."

Ron cursed under his breath. "This bloody thing isn't doing anything but getting on my nerves..."

"Try it again, Ron. You've got to get it right. This is one of the quizzes that're supposed to indicate how well we're preparing for our O.W.L.'s, remember?"

Ron sat forward in his seat again huffily and balled up another piece of parchment. He lifted his wand, paused, and turned to her with a thoughtful yet defiant expression. "You know, it's snails we're supposed to be vanishing anyway, innit? How's practicing on parchment gonna help? It's kind of two different things, right?"

"Oh you can be so dense sometimes. Yes, you have to do it slightly differently with live things, but if you don't learn the basics you won't be able to do it at all, will you?"

Ron opened his mouth to retort but Harry stopped him. The clock in the common room sang: "Top of the twelfth hour, children! Lessons await! Pip pip!"

"Come on, then. We don't have any more time." Harry stood up and they followed suit, gathering their things. Hermione took time to carry her books up to her dorm and they left the common room together for Transfiguration with Professor McGonagall.

As they made their way down to McGonagall's classroom, Harry tuned out Ron and Hermione's bickering and instead lost himself in his own thoughts. He wondered why it was taking Sirius so long to answer his letter. He also hoped that Dumbledore would return soon. He felt so cut off from everyone, especially his godfather. Angelina floated to the surface of his thoughts as well, causing him to smile to himself. As they walked he didn't notice that some of the paintings were whispering to each other upon his passing them. A few even left their frames to run into their neighbors' in order to keep up with him.

A painting of one of the old caretakers cleared his throat, casting a wary eye down on him. "A little young to be sneaking around with girls, aren't we boy?"

Harry looked up at him sharply. "What?"

"In my day boys slept on one side of the castle and girls on the other!" he said dramatically, snorting and rolling his bulging eyes. "News travels in this castle. You'd best be rememberin' that." He leaned back in his ragged armchair and folded his burley arms across his chest, huffing on his pipe. It seemed that was his final word on the matter. Harry glared at him, about to inquire the source of this so-called 'news' but Hermione and Ron were ahead waiting for him to catch up to them.

"What was that all about?" Hermione asked, looking back over her shoulder at the painting.

"Nothing. Got me mixed up with someone else, I guess."

Hermione didn't look convinced, but she remained silent.

In Transfiguration, the quiz McGonagall had ready for them was indeed with live snails, and not inanimate things as Harry and Ron had hoped. In fact, most of the students in the class; including Malfoy, Harry was at least pleased to see; seemed to have forgotten that this would be so, because they all did poorly. Neville Longbottom managed to make one of the legs of his desk vanish, but nothing else. Malfoy kept saying the incantation wrong, and his snail looked slightly transparent but remained visible. The same thing happened to Harry's snail, even though he was sure he was saying it right. He could only speculate that his wrist movement was wrong. Ron simply refused to try any more after he only caused his snail's shell to vanish, leaving the poor thing shivering on the desk.

Hermione got it right on the first try, of course, and her snail was nowhere to be found.

"I must say I am rather disappointed in all of you," Professor McGonagall said sternly when the quiz was over and she had made the rounds to see who had succeeded. "Not only does it seem you have not studied, but I doubt you've even paid attention in my class since the start of term! Miss Granger and Miss Patil are the only students who performed this spell correctly."

Hermione blushed but her grin remained.

"Hang on," Ron whispered as McGonagall continued to scold them. He leaned over closer to Harry and frowned thoughtfully. "I've been up to the seventh floor loads of times and I've never seen a closet across from that ugly painting thing..."

Harry shook his head distractedly. "You probably just didn't notice," he whispered back.

Hermione nudged him hard in the shoulder to get him to be quiet.

Ron, not noticing, tapped his quill against his lips. “No, no...I mean I went up there just a couple of days ago to help Neville find Trevor. I didn’t see anything.”

“Shhh!” Hermione hissed.

McGonagall cleared her throat harshly and they all stopped talking at once, sitting up straight at their desk. She eyed them stonily for a second and then continued speaking to the class. “Let me remind you all that your O.W.L. exams will be extremely thorough, and if you are not prepared for them it will be your own fault.”

With that, she assigned them double homework, ignoring their groans of protest. The clock sang the end of the lesson and everyone gathered their things, preparing to leave.

“Honestly, if you ask me, it’s because of you two that she gave us so much homework!” Hermione snapped as they made their way down to the Great Hall for lunch. “What were you carrying on about, anyway?”

“None of your business, Granger,” Ron retorted. “And since when do you care about getting extra homework? You love the stuff!”

“I’ve got loads of reading to do for Ancient Runes, Ron, and I don’t appreciate being left out...”

Harry opened his mouth, on the verge of giving in and telling her what was going on, when Angelina appeared in front of him. There was a look of pure distress clouding her attractive features. “I’m calling a team meeting in the common room before dinner,” she told him. Her tone was even, but Harry was certain she had run into Umbridge by now.

“Okay, then...” He wanted to say something else to her; something reassuring; but couldn’t think of anything. Before he could speak again, though, she had turned on her heel and marched over to the Gryffindor table, apparently too annoyed to discuss the matter further.

Hermione frowned at Angelina's retreating back. "What's going on?"

"Umbridge." Both Ron and Harry said in unison.

"What's she done, now?" Hermione moaned, her shoulders slumping in disappointment.

"Tell you later..." Ron muttered, walking ahead of them into the Hall. Hermione glared at him.

They took their usual seats at the Gryffindor table and Harry watched as Hermione buttered a croissant, looking slightly hurt and more than a little annoyed. Harry hated keeping secrets from her, and he decided that even though he'd failed to tell her properly the first time, now was different. He sighed and quietly recounted everything he'd told Ron—even about the fire whiskey; Ron looked as if he wanted to stop Harry, but he said nothing. She sat and listened, her eyes flickering with disapproval every now and again, but she didn't interrupt him.

When he'd finished he nervously picked up a sausage with a knife and let it drop to his plate without looking at her. He waited. Ron waited. Hermione merely chewed thoughtfully.

"Well..." she began after a while. "She is a bit older than you, Harry. That doesn't bother you?"

Harry stopped spreading the mustard on his bread and stared at her. He was deeply relieved and quite surprised that she had chosen not to yell at him for drinking fire whiskey and sneaking around the school with Fred and George. He took the time to consider her question seriously. Yes, Angelina was older than him. As intimidating as that was, it was also kind of intriguing and rather flattering. Harry didn't fool himself; he knew that he was in many ways just a kid. But even from his first year at Hogwarts he had seen and done things that put him past the level of most of the students there his age, even Ron and Hermione. He knew that most of the older students could not even pretend to know what he'd known; do what he'd done. He had witnessed death and been confronted more than once by the dark

wizard whose name no one dared utter but himself and very few others.

The only person who could claim that level of intimacy with such things was probably Ginny Weasley, who was sitting down just then, smiling at her boyfriend Michael Corner as he went to sit at the Ravenclaw table.

This led Harry back to his decision about teaching defensive magic to his classmates. The more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. And what better way to resist Umbridge's tyranny? Instead of losing his temper and saying things that he knew would get him into serious trouble, Harry would simply assume the role of make-shift D.A.D.A. teacher and resist the Ministry's offenses that way. Truthfully, this course of action would get them all into the worst kind of trouble if they were caught, but Harry had confidence for the time being that they could make it work.

"If you ask me, it's pretty wicked." Ron offered, breaking through Harry's thoughts. "Older girls are much more fascinating than girls our age."

Ginny snorted indignantly and Hermione made a face at him, but refrained from retorting to his comment. She looked at Harry expectantly.

"It doesn't bother me," he replied, taking a bite from his sausage.

Ginny looked puzzled, but did not ask what they were talking about. Harry would have told her, but he felt kind of off about it. He didn't rightly know why, but something about her knowing he and Angelina were getting closer made him hesitant. He remembered how enamored she'd been with him a while back. He told himself, however, that this had nothing to do with why he wasn't explaining the situation to her.

"Well if it doesn't bother you then I say good for you both." Hermione nodded her approval. "I remember when Viktor asked me to the Ball. I almost said no because he was seventeen and I was fourteen, but--"

"But, we're not talking about you and Viktor, Hermione." Ron cut her off, irritably biting into his roast beef sandwich. "And I'll thank you not to bring that treason up again."

"Honestly, Ronald, you're being ridiculous! If you still think that Viktor taking me to the Ball was--!"

"Hey, look, the post is here." Harry drew their attention to the windows, where a few dozen owls were swooping in, carrying various packages and letters. His eyes automatically searched for Hedwig's snowy white wings among the others, and to his delight he spotted her. She sailed toward him and landed neatly on the table next to the platter of deli meat, sticking her leg out dutifully. Harry gently untied the letter and opened it, taking a second to let her nibble a piece of bread from his plate. He read it first to himself, then in a hushed tone to Ron, Ginny, and Hermione.

Same place; same time.

-Snuffles

Harry looked to Hermione for some idea on how to take this. He was glad to be hearing from Sirius, but the abrupt and all too concise letter had left him with a rather uneasy feeling developing somewhere in his stomach.

"Let's just wait and see," Hermione told him.

Harry agreed, though hesitantly, that it was a good idea to wait. He needed to talk to his godfather about so many things, and getting a little info about what was going on with the Order would be a welcome change, even though Harry knew Sirius had probably been instructed not to divulge too much. The grown ups said it was for their protection, but he often felt that the lack of knowledge was doing more harm than good.

After lunch, the trio parted ways with Ginny and headed for their Care of Magical Creatures class with Professor Grubbly-Plank. Harry had seen Angelina with the twins during the meal, but made note of how she looked to be having a fairly serious conversation with them about something. He guessed that it was probably about the so-called

'probation' that the team was under, and the meeting she'd called. He wanted to speak with her, but she seemed totally into whatever she was discussing with Fred and George, so he didn't bother.

"Ginny asked me before we left who it was we were talking about," Hermione said as they made their way down the grassy incline that led to Hagrid's cabin. "I said maybe she should ask you."

"Why?" Harry frowned at her, not mentioning the fact that he'd had the very same inclination at the table. Her saying something to him about it now only justified his earlier instinct, though it didn't explain it any better.

Hermione looked at him as if he were thick and shook her head. "Never mind. It's your business. You tell her if you want."

Harry wanted to bring up his earlier thoughts, but as they had arrived in front of Hagrid's cabin, and there were Slytherins in earshot, he decided against questioning her about it. Besides, it was probably just that he needed a chance to figure out where to go from 'I fancy you' before he told anybody else. He wondered how many people Angelina had told. Was that what she and the twins had been talking about at lunch? And why did that make him a little...uneasy...?

"Oh, there's Potter, now." Malfoy's irritatingly snide voice pierced his thoughts and he looked up to see the lanky, blond-haired boy walking towards them, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle as always. "It looks as if you've heard, eh, Potter?"

"Heard what?" Ron grunted, his brow already furrowed with disdain.

Draco spared Ron one sharp, disgusted look before scoffing and turning back to Harry. "I don't believe I was speaking to you, Weasel. Potter knows what I'm talking about."

"Shove off, Malfoy," Harry said, truly ignorant of whatever it was Draco was on about. He didn't really care that much, but he always considered it a bad thing when Draco acted as if he knew something they didn't.

"Ha!" The Slytherin sneered, running a pale hand through his even paler head of hair for dramatic effect. "I'll forgive you that little slip, Potter. But when Umbridge and I judge your team at your next practice drill, you'd better not smart off."

"What?" Ron's jaw dropped and he stepped forward menacingly, but Hermione put a staying hand on his arm. "You're a ruddy liar, Malfoy!"

Again, Draco offered Ron a rather revolted look and turned his attention back to Harry. "And control your teammates. Any sass, and I might just tell old Umbridge that you're running around snogging your captain--"

Harry's hand tightened around his wand and he stepped up right alongside Ron, prepared to hex the bitter hell out of Malfoy if he didn't shut up, but then Professor Grubbly-Plank cleared her throat and asked that the class settle down. The relief in Draco's face was not lost on Harry as he backed away. Whilst the Professor was asking them questions on what they knew about unicorns, Hermione leaned over and whispered in Harry's ear. Ron stepped a little closer to them to hear.

"Draco isn't bluffing you know," she told them. "It sounds just like something Umbridge would do to throw you guys off—have Draco and whoever else judge the practice drills with her."

"Yeah, and it's obvious she favors him," said Harry.

"At least for the time being." Hermione replied. "He's going to do something to upset you, and she won't let you play if you react."

"That's barking mad!" Ron hissed, drawing a rather stern ahem from Grubbly-Plank. "What is she playing at?"

"I want to know how Draco found out about me and Angelina," Harry whispered darkly, staring daggers into the back of his enemy's head. Even with his back turned, Harry saw a distinct air of triumph about the boy, and wanted desperately to fire a hex at him.

"I don't know, but I'm sure he's said something to her." Hermione offered.

Harry looked at her. He hadn't thought about that, but it did make sense. It was probably one of the reasons why she looked so serious and distressed at lunch, and of course she would tell Fred and George about what happened. They were her best friends, and she would rant to them about Malfoy because they were rather good at abusing the boy verbally. The prospect of the twins knowing mired him somewhat with nervous anticipation. Knowing Fred and George, half the Gryffindor house would've heard by dinner. And knowing Draco, half the Slytherin house already had. Harry remembered the painting of the old caretaker Gerty Cuthbert. He acted as if hearing about Angelina and Harry's kiss was first-rate gossip. Why, exactly? That feeling of uneasiness returned to him, mingling with his anger at Malfoy.

"How did he find out?" Harry whispered, more to himself than either of his two friends. He wasn't paying attention to Grubbly-Plank at all. "He must've seen us..."

"Ruddy pumpkin head!" Ron hissed. Harry looked up and saw that Draco and his friends were making very loud kissing noises and over-exaggerated swooning motions behind Grubbly-Plank's back. Pansy Parkinson threw her hand to her forehead and pretended to faint, falling over Draco dramatically. Draco frowned, pushing her off a bit, but then smirked and feigned riding an imaginary broom, shaking his head no. No more Quidditch for you, Potter, he mouthed.

If Harry weren't afraid of expulsion or detention with Umbridge, he would have taken a page from Hermione's book and punched the arsehole right in the nose.

Chapter Seven: Close Call

As they left Hagrid's cabin, Harry stoically ignored Draco's high-pitched "See you at practice, Pottykins!" amongst the whoops and catcalls of his fellow Slytherins.

"It's okay, Harry." Hermione whispered, but Harry merely sped up so that they soon left Draco and his entourage out of ear-shot. Herbology wasn't as bad, because they were indoors and could hardly say anything without Professor Sprout noticing. It didn't stop Malfoy from mimicking him and Angelina with Pansy every time the teacher had her back turned, however.

Harry was fuming by dinner time. He had almost forgotten about the team meeting, so when he stepped into the common room with Ron and Hermione he found the gathering of all of the players somewhat off-putting. He was in a foul mood. Angelina's temperament didn't seem to be any better. She was sitting cross-legged on the hearthrug, frowning angrily at a piece of parchment in her lap. Harry and Ron sat down next to Dean and Alicia Spinnet on one of the sofas, muttering to Hermione that they would see her at dinner. Dean leaned over to Harry and shook his head, his eyes on Angelina.

"She's been trying to figure out a practice schedule to give to Umbridge," he whispered.

Harry nodded, his eyes also on Angelina. There was another pause in which their captain sighed and rubbed her temples in frustration. When she finally addressed them again, she sounded a little more optimistic than she'd looked two seconds before, which Harry figured was more for the team's benefit than in earnest. "All right, then. We've got two drills coming up: one tomorrow morning after breakfast and one next Tuesday night after dinner. Everyone okay with that?"

There was a mumbled scattering of half-hearted agreement.

"What did Umbridge have to say?" Katie Bell wanted to know.

"She's gone and pulled one over on us." Angelina responded bitterly. "She's got Draco Malfoy and a few others helping her do some sort of

review of all the teams.” She went on to explain the so-called ‘Ministry Standard of Conduct and Good Sportsmanship’ to them, her tone darkening as she spoke. “It’s some stupid code of conduct that all the organizations and teams have to abide by. It’s got pretty severe consequences if the code is broken.”

“She can get away with that?” Ron whispered to Harry.

“Of course she can,” Harry muttered.

“That’s rubbish, that is!” George Weasley raised his voice, his brother nodding in agreement. “Is there anything in that code about spiking a teacher’s pumpkin juice with Gassy Goose?”

“Don’t start, George.” Angelina warned. “We’ve all got to do our best to behave--” (she looked at Harry for a second as she said this) “--and get through the practices without incident.”

“So we can still play the match against Slytherin next Saturday, can’t we?” Someone asked hopefully.

Angelina stood up. “If we can act civilized enough to convince Umbridge to let us.”

“That’s not likely with Malfoy hanging around.” Ron spoke up. “He all but said he would make sure we don’t get to play last period.”

“Who else does she have helping her?” Harry wanted to know.

Angelina shrugged. “Zacharius Smith and some seventh year from Ravenclaw.”

“Her little minions, I expect. I knew we couldn’t trust that Smith kid as far as we could throw him...” Ron clenched his jaw angrily.

Harry sighed and ran a hand thoughtfully through his hair. “Zach may still be on our side. He doesn’t fancy me much, but he wants to win the Quidditch Cup as much as anybody else.”

"Yeah, but that's probably why he wouldn't want our team to play, Harry," Ron pressed. "He wants Hufflepuff to win and everyone knows that we'd shred them before they even came close to getting the Cup!"

"Even if Zach does try to sabotage us, or Malfoy, or anyone else, we can't let them." Angelina asserted again firmly. "Trust me, they'll use anything to get to us..." Her eyes definitely lingered on him at that time, and Harry knew that she was talking about them. So Malfoy did say something to her, he thought resentfully. He wondered what this meant would happen (or not happen) between them now. He was in the middle of these thoughts when Alicia Spinnet cleared her throat.

"Um, well...since you say that Angelina..." Harry turned to look at his teammate, his throat closing slightly. Tell me she isn't going to ask what I think she is... Alicia looked for a moment as if she would chicken out, but regained her resolve and looked at Harry pointedly before addressing Angelina again. "I've heard some things."

"What 'things?'" Angelina's voice had taken on a hard edge that Harry recognized as a warning.

"Things about you, uh...sort of favoring one of the team members...in a kind of unfair way." Angelina opened her mouth to speak but Alicia quickly shook her head as if she hadn't meant any harm by what she was saying. Harry really wanted her to shut up. "Isn't it in the Standard of Good Conduct and Sportsmanship or whatever it's called? Dating among team members being forbidden?"

"Who'd you hear that from?" Harry asked, despite himself.

Alicia hesitated, looking a bit discouraged, but sighed and muttered, "Pansy Parkinson..."

Ron screwed up his face at Alicia as if she'd suddenly morphed into a giant turkey. "You must be joking!"

The whole team rounded on him as if he were the one Alicia had been suggesting that Angelina favored. Katie Bell clicked her tongue

impatiently and crossed her arms, glaring at Ron. “She’s not joking, Ron. This is serious.”

“Well I’m just saying that it’s a rumor that’s all!”

“Pansy Parkinson’s head is so full of hot air that she could fly to the moon if she concentrated hard enough,” Fred quipped.

Harry was glad to hear Ron and Fred stand up for him. He no longer suspected the twins of spreading the news about Angelina and him—they looked positively scandalized.

The team argued for a further ten minutes, everyone putting in their two cents worth on what they thought was going on. Angelina kept insisting that the only thing that could save them was if they played by Umbridge’s rules. Harry found this way of thinking somewhat irritating, but couldn’t say that he totally disagreed. Defying Umbridge outright had gotten him nowhere so far. If they acted like they were doing everything she wanted on the surface, it might make things easier for them to carry on their collective resistance in secret.

When the meeting was adjourned, Harry wasted no time telling Ron to go on to dinner without him. He was relieved that Angelina had the same idea; she was taking extra long to peruse her notebook while the others filed out of the common room still buzzing amongst themselves. After the last few Gryffindors ambled through the portrait hole, Harry got up from the sofa and went to sit next to Angelina on the hearthrug. She didn’t look at him at first, but instead remained staring intently at her notebook. Harry knew there was nothing very engaging written on the parchment; she must’ve gone over the same few lines a hundred times. He hesitated for only a moment longer, feeling he ought to say something but not having the words ready.

“You’re angry?” he asked finally, and a bit lamely he thought.

Angelina sighed and shook her head, her ponytail swinging to and fro gently. “I was hoodwinked. I can’t believe I thought it would be so easy...” Harry watched her toss the notebook off of her lap with a frustrated grunt. “Ugh, I should’ve seen it coming.”

"Nobody blames you..." He was doing a rotten job of consoling her. He didn't know what else to say.

"Oh no?" She looked at him finally, her eyes narrowing incredulously. "Alicia and Katie sounded like they were ready to vote on a new captain right then and there."

"They would never do that. They'd be stupid if they did. It was all just—" Harry crossed his legs under himself and leaned over to get closer to her. "--they were only trying to find out if what they heard was true."

"Yeah..." Angelina scoffed. "It wouldn't even be an issue if Malfoy hadn't..." she trailed off, her eyes avoiding his again.

Harry furrowed his brow inquisitively. She sounded as if she knew something he didn't. He didn't think she would tell him right away, so he decided to keep talking in hopes that hearing his side of things would convince her to confide in him.

"He and his stupid friends were going on about it in class today," he began grimly, narrowing his eyes. "They wouldn't stop making kissing noises and calling me 'Pottykins.' It was so hard to resist turning his head into a pincushion or something..." She chuckled half-heartedly and he went on. "I wish I knew that trick Moody used last year...I'd love to see him scurrying around in Goyle's pants again."

"It's my fault, Harry." Angelina looked at him rather miserably. "Draco caught me in the courtyard, um..."

"What?" Harry was rather intrigued to know what exactly she'd been doing that would lead Draco to the conclusion that she fancied him.

"I was drawing up diagrams, you know, for practice, and uh well I got a little distracted..." she looked more embarrassed now than anything else, and he had to suppress a curious grin. "I was doodling."

She seemed unwilling to elaborate. Harry cocked his head sideways and cast an innocent look in her direction. "Doodling what?" His slightly raised eyebrows emphasized the curiosity he was attempting to play down. What could she have been drawing that would tip

off...? "Oh. You were drawing...us?" Harry sat there for a second, at a loss for words. He was probably blushing; he could feel his cheeks and ears growing hot. They sat for a few moments saying nothing, the Grandfather clock ticking away.

"I-I hadn't meant for him to see it," Angelina spoke up. "The sneaky little bastard. He acted so smug! I wanted to kill him!"

"Mmm, yeah..." Harry cleared his throat and nodded sympathetically, waiting until the happy grin he was trying to suppress subsided before he said anything else. "Don't worry about it, Angelina," and he gave her wrist a light brush with his fingers, feeling that spark light up within him again as she offered a half-hearted smile. "Come on."

Angelina looked at the clock and stood up. "So I guess the question is: are you mad at me?"

He shook his head, taking a second to gather his courage before he stood up and leaned over to kiss her. He mimicked her movements from last night, softly capturing her lips and releasing them. Harry didn't know what the hell he was doing, but it felt right. He half-expected her to rebuff him in some way, but when he looked down at his shoes shyly she took hold of his chin and brought his face back up to hers. He felt a rush of warm air zoom down his chest and into his stomach as her lips found his again and lingered for an enjoyably long beat.

"I'm starving!" She said when she released him.

Harry blinked, somewhat dazed, but recovered quickly and managed to make some sort of grunt in agreement. She didn't take his hand this time, but it felt no less thrilling to have her walk very closely to him as they made their way out of the common room and down to the Great Hall. They chatted a bit about their favorite international Quidditch teams among other things. Angelina's voice was deep yet very smooth; very straightforward most of them but just occasionally it rose girlishly or wavered emotionally as she spoke about different things. Harry mostly listened, finding enjoyment where their hands would brush together or the skin on their arms would touch. She smelled good...

When they made it down to dinner and took their usual seats, Harry ate in contented silence, ignoring the prodding looks he received from Ron and Hermione. He finished his mashed potatoes and roast chicken just in time, swallowing a huge helping right before the food on all the plates disappeared and everything was spotless again. Ron licked the remainder of the chocolate pudding from his fingers and burped loudly. “What took you so long, then?” He asked as the trio left their seats and joined the fray heading through the doors.

Harry shrugged vaguely, his eyes finding themselves attached to the back of Angelina’s ponytail.

Hermione was looking at him with a shrewd smirk on her face, but said nothing. They spent the rest of the hours before they were to see Sirius studying. Harry tried without much result to focus and finish the essay Professor Snape had assigned him on Strengthening Solutions. Hermione kept one disapproving eye on the twins, who were showing off one of their latest inventions to a crowd of eager-looking underclassmen. She made a disgusted face at them as they projectile-vomited into buckets amongst the enthusiastic applause of their onlookers. Ron pretended for an impressive amount of time to be reading his Transfiguration textbook, but soon fell asleep.

When the twins finally finished their demonstration and collected the last of their profit, Harry was close to dozing off himself before Ron sat upright in his chair, gaping at the fireplace. “Sirius?”

Harry turned around quickly, his face already spreading into a happy grin, and saw Sirius’s head sitting in the flames. He was also smiling broadly, a cheery gleam in his eyes that had nothing to do with the light from the fire. The three students, with Crookshanks slinking in between them, gathered around him on the hearthrug.

“How are you three doing?” Sirius asked cheerfully.

They all muttered separate answers. Harry’s “Not so good...” was the loudest. Sirius frowned and Harry explained what was going on with Umbridge’s loathsome decrees and the trouble with the team not

being able to play. “She’s making it impossible for us to do anything, let alone play Quidditch or--”

“Start secret Defense Against the Dark Arts groups?” Sirius’s smile returned.

“How’d you know about that?” Ron asked, squinting suspiciously.

If Sirius had shoulders he would’ve shrugged. “You can’t think you’re totally on your own up here. The Order has placed people here to keep an eye on you. For your own safety of course,” he added this last when he saw the indignant shadow pass across Harry’s face. “I ask you...why the Hog’s Head? That’s the last place I’d have chosen to have a secret meeting.”

“Well I figured it would be too crowded at the Three Broomsticks,” Hermione explained uncertainly. “Too many people could overhear.”

Sirius made a doubtful face. “That’s one way to look at it, Hermione. Or...” he went on to suggest that perhaps the crowd would’ve done them a service rather than harm. It would’ve been easier for them to disguise their conversation with all the activity in the Broomsticks. Hermione relented that she hadn’t thought of it that way and Sirius gently reminded her that he’d had more practice at being sneaky. “You’ll get the hang of it eventually.”

“So you don’t think it’s a bad idea?” Harry asked. “You don’t think we’re risking too much?”

“It’s a risk, certainly, but it’s an excellent idea!”

They chatted for a while about who had overheard them in the Hog’s Head. It was Mundungus Fletcher disguised as a witch, of all things. Sirius dutifully passed on a stern message from Ron’s mother warning them not to do anything that could get them expelled. He confided in them, however, that he was proud of them for deciding to do something to protect themselves, even if it was going against the wishes of most of their elders. Harry felt rather good about Sirius being so agreeable, and grinned through most of the conversation.

"We could get expelled for this, you know," Hermione said at one point as if it had only just occurred to her.

"Too right you could," Sirius agreed, watching Crookshanks attempt to paw at his head. "But I'd rather you were expelled learning to defend yourselves against the forces that mean you harm than walking around this school without a clue."

"Exactly," Ron and Harry piped up in unison.

Hermione got quiet, seemingly thinking over their responses. She reached out and pulled Crookshanks away from the fire before he burned himself. Sirius focused his attention on Harry again.

"Anything else you want to talk about, Harry?" His godfather asked, genuinely interested. "I haven't got much time, but I'd love to know how you're doing these days."

Harry thought he heard a hint of wistfulness in the older wizard's voice, but shrugged and reached down to fiddle with a hole in the hearthrug. There was a pause in which he debated in his head whether or not he should tell Sirius about Angelina, but Ron beat him to the punch.

"Harry's got a girlfriend."

"Oh?" Sirius's eyebrows rose up with curiosity. "Really, Harry?"

"And she's a seventh year," Ron piped up again, laughing at the stark crimson shade Harry's cheeks had suddenly produced. He dodged a punch in the arm from his friend that startled Crookshanks, who scampered off with an annoyed hiss.

"Shut up, Ron." Harry avoided Sirius' gaze.

"A girlfriend, eh, Harry? Well that certainly is something." Harry only shrugged again, still not looking at the man. "And older, too? Boy you've done your father proud. Resisting the Ministry and becoming quite the ladies' man."

"Honestly..." Hermione muttered indignantly.

Harry looked at Sirius finally. "She's not technically my girlfriend. We just...like each other. That's all."

"I see..." Harry saw the wise look in his godfather's eyes and couldn't help breaking into a smile. "Well, I'm sure she's a lovely girl. Now! Where are you planning to hold these secret meetings of yours?"

"Well we haven't figured that part out just yet," Hermione admitted.

"May I suggest the Shrieking Shack? We used to hold Marauder's meetings there all the time. Your father loved it, Harry."

It was Hermione's turn to look doubtful. "I'm not sure that's a good idea. It'll be too hard to get all of us out there. No offense, but it was only four of you when you did it. There's almost thirty of us now."

Sirius looked crestfallen for a split second, then sighed thoughtfully. "You're right. That is rather difficult." They all thought for a while, each taking turns suggesting things that they inevitably decided against. No to empty classrooms. No to Hagrid's cabin. No to the Astronomy Tower, no to Moaning Myrtle's lavatory, and no to any of the house dormitories. Harry was becoming quite discouraged when Sirius's face lit up with a bemused expression. "I wonder..." he muttered to himself.

"What? Have we missed somewhere?" Harry asked anxiously.

"Have you ever seen that hideous tapestry of Barnabas the Barmey trying to train those trolls to do ballet on the seventh floor?"

It took Harry a couple of seconds to catch on, but then he started, sitting up on his haunches and leaning closer to the fire. "Yeah, last year! I, er...well, I've been up there."

Not noticing Hermione's reproachful snort, Sirius beamed at him. "Well there used to be a curious room up there, opposite that tapestry. It's kind of a tricky thing, but it just might work."

Ron frowned. “You mean the broom cupboard? Thirty people aren’t going to fit in there.”

“I imagine it was a broom cupboard for you, Ron, but it could be anything you want, really.” They all looked confused, but Sirius went on to explain that he and James had stumbled upon the room during their fifth year and used it to sneak away sometimes with homemade fire whiskey and a deck of wizard playing cards or Remus’ chess set. Hermione crossed her arms and gave Harry a look upon hearing the part about the whiskey, but he ignored her. “Some of the house elves were talking about it in the kitchens one night—James and I went down there a lot to knick food—and they called it the ‘Come and Go Room,’ or the ‘Room of Requirement.’ ”

“Why?” Harry inquired, growing more and more excited.

“Because sometimes it’s there and sometimes it’s not,” Sirius replied as if that made sense to them. “But when it is there, it’s usually just what a person needs. James and I needed a place to drink and play cards after hours, so it became such a place for us. The elves said sometimes the caretaker used it when he needed extra cleaning supplies and was running out. And--”

“...if you needed someplace to hide...” Harry said, suddenly remembering the twins’ story about how they found the room while being chased by Filch. “...it turns into a broom cupboard!”

“Exactly!” Sirius exclaimed happily. He seemed rather satisfied with himself. “And not many people know about it. I suspect the occasional student or teacher might stumble upon it when they need something, but they’ll likely never find it again.”

“I’ve been up there,” Harry replied, his heart racing. “With Fred and George. It had everything we needed and I didn’t even realize it.” It all made sense to him, now. The table with exactly four chairs, the four shot glasses, and the candles when Angelina asked for them....

“That sounds brilliant!” Ron whispered, impressed.

"No wonder you didn't see it up there, Ron," Harry told him. "You didn't exactly need anything."

"But you three need a place for you and your classmates to practice your spell work, so I suggest you waste no time." Sirius said firmly. "Now if I remember correctly, to get into the room, you have to walk past the wall three times and concentrate hard on--"

He stopped talking abruptly and an odd look came across his face. His features tensed up and he turned sideways to stare at the wall behind him. "What's wrong?" Harry asked, alarmed, but a second later Sirius had vanished. Harry turned to Ron and Hermione. "Why did he just disappear like that? How're we going to get into the--?"

"Oh no!" Hermione gasped and jumped up, followed closely by Ron. Harry turned to see a chubby hand swiping at the flames where Sirius's head had been seconds before. He too dashed away from the startling sight, his mouth wide open in shock and fear.

Umbridge's hand continued to grope at the flames as the trio hurried up to their dorms, and Harry knew as he backed up the stairs behind Ron that it was trying in vain to catch hold of his godfather's hair.

Chapter Eight: Good Sportsmanship

Harry tossed and turned that night.

He drifted in and out of semi-consciousness; the dreams he had melted together one after the other and blended seamlessly into his fits of wakefulness. His anger and fear at almost being caught by Umbridge fueled the strange dreams, and though he woke many times to find himself sweating and breathing hard, he would always eventually drift back to sleep, falling into the next bizarre vision.

The last one found him sitting by the fire, talking to Sirius. Harry was smiling contently as he listened to his godfather congratulate him on his first drink of fire whiskey.

"It's much more potent than Muggle spirits, you know," Sirius mused, giving Harry a small poke of *déjà vu*. "Gets you goofy way faster."

"That's what it felt like..." Harry agreed, even though he had never actually had any Muggle spirits before. He was just happy to be talking to his godfather, happy to be sitting here in front of this warm fireplace staring into the kind yet dark eyes of the older wizard. There was Crookshanks as well, pawing at Sirius's head and mewing softly. Harry lazily stroked the cat's arched back, still grinning.

"And what about this girlfriend of yours?" Sirius asked, a look of amused appraisal crossing his face. "Have you kissed her yet?"

Harry shrugged shyly and pulled Crookshanks away from the fire. "A few times, actually. She's the captain of the Quidditch team. I really like her." He blinked at himself, musing that he hadn't actually realized it until now, but he liked Angelina a lot.

"That's good. So it wasn't just the fire whiskey, then?" Sirius chuckled at Harry's look.

"I suppose I should tell Cho it's off..." Harry found himself saying quietly.

"Who's Cho?"

Harry opened his mouth to answer but Sirius let out a sharp gasp and suddenly the flames rose up like mad, causing the young boy to jump back anxiously. "Sirius, what's wrong?!" Harry drew his wand from his pocket, watching in horror as the other wizard's head twisted and turned around in the fire; he was choking and sputtering as if he were struggling with something or someone. Then Harry saw the hand in Sirius's hair, pulling at him as if trying to yank his head off his shoulders.

"Let go of him!" Harry yelled, lunging at the fireplace and actually putting his hands in the flames.

"Harry, don't!" Someone had grabbed hold of him before he could feel anything and was pulling him back roughly. Harry slapped at the hands pulling on his shirt and arm, twisting his body angrily in effort to release himself, but the hands persisted. Now both he and Sirius were fighting for their freedom: he in order to help his godfather, and Sirius in order to escape persecution for daring to be a kind soul rather than the murderer everyone thought he was.

Harry rolled around in his bed, physically kicking at his sheets and grunting angrily at his dream attacker.

The hands released him finally and he heard a hurt gasp escape his attacker's lips. Harry whirled around to see who had been holding him and he saw to his astonishment that it had been Angelina.

"What are you doing?" He bellowed at her. "Sirius needs my help--!" Harry pointed at the fireplace and made to lunge at it again, but he found no fire, no Sirius. "But...b-but he was just there! He's gone, now, thanks to you."

"I don't get you, Harry," Angelina told him, crossing her arms resentfully. "I thought you liked me. Why would you yell at me like that?"

"You don't understand," Harry panted, tearing his eyes away from the empty fireplace. "I do like you, but Sirius is in trouble and you can't just--!"

“Sirius is probably back in Azkaban by now. Umbridge got him. Grow up Harry.”

His eyes bulged and he stared at her as if she were mad. “What?”

“I said grow up and take me to the Yule Ball like you promised. I’ve got a new dress!” And she beamed at him, even though he knew she must have clearly seen the look of immense panic and terror on his face.

“What, what...?” Harry moaned in his sleep, rolling over onto his stomach, which felt as if it were filling with the empty feeling of sadness like one filled a water goblet with liquid. “Can’t be...Gotta stop her...”

Next thing he knew he was chasing after her down the empty halls of Hogwarts yelling for her to come back and help him find his godfather, damn it! She ran much faster than him, and he had to pump his legs double-hard to keep up with her. Angelina turned sharply around a corner and disappeared, and when he skidded after her he found himself in that same, dark corridor...staring at the mysterious door at the end. All thoughts of Angelina and Sirius vanished and he concentrated all of his energy on getting through that door. He really fought for it this time, somehow feeling that he was going to make it. He was going to make it!

“Harry!”

“No!” Harry let out a disappointed cry, jerked sharply, and snapped his eyes open. He was glaring up at Dean’s startled face. “What?!” he snapped. The second he said it he realized that he hadn’t meant to, and that the anger was probably the last lingering fragments of the dream. Sighing wearily, Harry rubbed his eyes and put his glasses on. “Sorry. What is it?”

“You’ve missed breakfast, mate.” Dean frowned, attempting to mask his obvious hurt at being yelled at. “Practice is in fifteen minutes and Angelina’s got a foul face on. Better hurry up.”

"Great," Harry grumbled, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed and sitting up. He stifled a yawn and scratched his shoulder blade awkwardly before standing. His other roommates, including Ron, were all dressed and had gone. Dean was just pulling on his shoes when Harry took up his towel from the iron furnace in the middle of the room. He showered and got dressed as quickly as possible, but by the time he was hurrying down the stairs into the common room he only had three minutes to be down at the pitch. Cursing under his breath, Harry made a mad dash through the portrait hole and didn't stop running until he was dragging himself limply through the door of the changing rooms, his chest feeling as if his lungs would explode.

"Sorry I'm...late..." he panted, throwing his stuff on a bench next to Ron and collapsing beside them. Angelina grunted in response, clearly distracted and nervous. Harry thought this a bad omen for the hour ahead, and made an effort to push her behavior in his dream to the back of his mind. Ron produced a rather fine-smelling parcel from his bag and sat it on Harry's lap.

"Knicked you a muffin and a bit of bacon," he told him apologetically. "I thought it would be best to let you sleep. You looked knackered." He chuckled as he watched Harry hungrily unwrap the napkin and take a huge bite of blueberry muffin, accompanied by two strips of bacon.

"Thanks," Harry said thickly, smiling in appreciation despite his full mouth. "But next time wake me. I'd rather be tired and full than awake and hungry." He gulped down the last of the bacon and rewrapped the left-over piece of muffin.

"You were also kinda tossing and turning in your sleep last night," Ron added as they began to change into their Quidditch gear. "Sounded like another bad dream."

"Yeah, it was..." Harry trailed off, his eyes narrowing as he thought over the strange occurrences of his nightmare. "I'll tell you about it later," he added when he saw Angelina pulling her whistle from her locker.

The team got dressed and Angelina gathered them around her.

"Okay listen up, you lot," she began confidently. "Even though this is just a practice drill, we have to treat it a little differently today. I saw Malfoy and Smith out there a minute ago. No sign of Umbridge or that Ravenclaw bloke yet, but I wouldn't count on them not showing up."

She went on speaking to them, telling them that if they just tried to pretend that the others weren't there and acted natural, yet behaved, they would get through it all right. She urged them not to let anything Malfoy or Umbridge said upset them. Harry could feel her intense need to get through this, and he understood that she was counting on them to help her. Of course, she also acknowledged the absurdity of it all, but relented that sometimes a person had to put up with certain things to move ahead.

"She's decided to pick on us for whatever reason," Angelina told them, probably choosing not to say that that reason was sitting among them wearing glasses and sporting a lightening-shaped scar on his forehead. "Even though she claims the other teams are going through it, too, I doubt they get it as bad as we will...but no matter! We'll show them why Gryffindor is the best Quidditch team at Hogwarts!"

They all cheered 'here, here!' and prepared to leave, but Professor McGonagall walked in just then, wearing her scarlet cloak as if she were attending an actual match rather than a practice drill.

"I've just a few words; then I'll be on my way," she said, surveying them all austerely over the rim of her spectacles. "I have grown accustomed to seeing the Quidditch Cup in my office, and I don't expect that it would be removed any time soon, hmm?" They all nodded silently, really feeling the pressure. Harry did think it was absurd—it was only a practice for Merlin's sake! Professor McGonagall continued. "Now Professor Umbridge has gotten all the support she needs from the Ministry and from certain teachers at this school," Harry smiled to himself at the way she said 'Umbridge' and 'certain teachers' as if she'd caught a stench in her nose. "But as for myself and the Headmaster, well...you know where we stand. We expect you all to uphold this code and represent the Gryffindor House properly, is that clear?"

"Yes, Professor," everyone chimed.

"Good. Miss Johnson?"

"Ma'am?"

"I trust that even though you'll be practicing for up-coming matches you won't choose today to, eh...well reveal anything special...?"

Angelina looked at McGonagall with a blank expression for a beat, clearly not catching on. The Professor cleared her throat and made a gesture towards Angelina's playbook, which was sticking out from the shelf in her locker. The girl piped up then, shaking her head vigorously. "Oh! No, Professor, absolutely not. I mean, I've got things, but I won't be letting any of the enemy team members lurking out there get to see them. No way."

"I was wondering about that..." Dean whispered.

"Me too..." Harry muttered, relieved.

"Good girl." McGonagall nodded approvingly at the young captain, giving them all a wink and a smile before sweeping out of the changing room in a flash of scarlet.

"Right then." Angelina took a deep breath. "Let's go."

Harry's mind ran the course of his bizarre dream as they shouldered their brooms and filed one after the other out of the dressing room.

The day was gray and overcast. The clouds moved slowly, blocking the sun, and Harry knew it would probably rain before long. He had the slow burning feeling of dread coming upon him. Ron was quiet, as was most of the team. It was as if they were heading toward a match they knew they would lose. The funny thing was: this wasn't a match at all.

Harry watched Angelina as she led them, wondering what she was thinking. He knew better than to consider dream Angelina any sort of truthful representation of real Angelina, but the events of his

nightmare stayed with him, lingering at the back of his mind like those clouds that threatened rain.

"Harry, look!" Ron hissed, stopping short at the threshold of the tunnel to the pitch. Harry turned to the direction Ron was pointing and his jaw dropped. Predictably, Draco and Zacharius Smith were standing at the far end of the field, where the spectators normally entered for a match. They were accompanied by Tom Hacking of Ravenclaw and...Hermione. "What in the bloody hell is she doing out there!"

Harry shook his head, somewhat shocked into silence. Katie nudged them both forward impatiently, and so they had to move on and walk out onto the pitch, glaring at Hermione, who looked completely uncomfortable and apologetic.

"She's a prefect, isn't she?" Dean said to them when they were in the middle of the field, where they normally started real matches. "So are Tom and Zacharius."

"And Draco..." Harry finished, nodding. "That makes sense, I guess."

"No it bloody well doesn't!" Ron spat, outraged. "Why would Hermione be out there with them?"

"Malfoy doesn't seem too happy about it, look." Harry gestured to Draco, whose face was set in irritation and disgust. "This might be a good thing, Ron."

Ron didn't seem convinced; his face remained taught with anger and he continued to mutter under his breath. Angelina ran across the pitch towards where Hermione and the others were standing. Harry watched her confer with Malfoy, who seemed to have elected himself leader of the pack. He could tell even from yards away that Malfoy was being an evil prat, but Angelina seemed to be doing her best to put up with it. It isn't fair she has to take his crap, Harry thought bitterly. And where is Umbridge?

The ominous presence of the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher was not felt, and upon searching the length of the pitch and even squinting up into the bleacher towers, Harry could not find her at all. It

almost made him feel better, but he knew he couldn't count on this being a good sign. He watched Angelina make her way back over to them once she'd stopped to spare a quick passing of words with Hermione. He took notice that she was smiling a bit, even though Hermione was still looking put upon and regretful.

"Hey, looks like it won't be so bad," their captain informed them upon her return. "Dimwit over there told me Umbridge has a meeting, so they're all assembled to do her dirty work."

"Why isn't that so bad? Draco's a menace." Ron pointed out. "Especially with no teachers around."

"Well, they just have some stupid list—that code I had you guys read—and they won't be able to tell half of it based on a practice drill. The rest would really have to be judged during an actual match, wouldn't it?" Angelina was speaking as if really thinking aloud. It seemed that none of this had occurred to her before. Indeed, Harry hadn't bothered to think of it that way, either.

"So what do we do?" Fred asked.

Angelina shrugged. "Just practice. Like I said. If they spot something they don't like, they can only make a note of it and pass it on to Umbridge."

"That's it?" the twins chimed.

"Yeah. Bonkers, innit?" Angelina's relieved smile grew wider, now.

"I still say Malfoy will make trouble..." Ron grumbled. Harry agreed with him, but said nothing.

Angelina blew her whistle and gestured that they should get started. Malfoy had bellowed a rather aggravated "Stop poking around and practice already, will you?" but they ignored him. They mounted their brooms and kicked off. Harry lingered, flying low and aligning himself with Angelina.

"What did Hermione say?" he asked.

She smiled and winked at him. “McGonagall picked her to help; she got a note this morning and she had no choice. She’s really sorry.”

Harry couldn’t help but return Angelina’s smile, even when she blew her whistle again, causing him to shoot up ahead of her to escape the sharp noise. They did some standard laps around the pitch, and he used the time to think about the details of the so-called “Code” that Umbridge had written out as a standard of behavior for all groups, teams, and clubs.

There was number one: All students participating in any group, team, or club must have expressed permission from the High Inquisitor to meet/practice, and must inform her in advance of the times and dates of all meeting/practices throughout the school year.

With their secret defense group, that rule had been broken already. Of course, Angelina had been forced to give Umbridge a schedule of Quidditch practices for the next two weeks.

Angelina put them into pairs and they began practicing their passing techniques. Even Harry had to do this, for Angelina had told him early on that she planned on cross-training him in case they had to switch people around for any reason. As he and George passed the Quaffle to each other while running through an obstacle course of Bludgers being hit by the other team members, Harry remembered rule twelve in the code.

Students participating in athletic teams or clubs containing a hierarchy of authority may not in any way engage in relationships that are inappropriate to that hierarchy, or that promote the unfair favoritism of any team or club member by another of higher rank. This includes siblings, housemates, and significant others. Doing so risks immediate disciplinary action by the High Inquisitor, including but not limited to the removal of the students involved or disbandment of the team or club.

Harry ducked a Bludger and caught the Quaffle before it sailed past him into one of the bleacher towers. They switched, and it was Ron and Katie’s turn. As his friend took the Quaffle from him, Harry gave

him a reassuring smile. His eyes focused next on Angelina, who was on the opposite side of the lineup with her whistle in her mouth.

He figured that she had probably already thought of ways to keep their budding relationship under wraps, and it was fine by him. Relationship? Harry thought. Really? Wow... It was bad enough to have Malfoy and his crew gossiping about them, but to have Umbridge suspend either of them from the team because of it was just rubbish. They would just have to contend themselves with having private study sessions in the Room of Requirement...Harry grinned openly at his foolish thoughts and almost missed the Bludger that was coming his way. Fred had lobbed it right at his head and he had to swerve around, almost knocking Alicia Spinnet off her broom, to avoid it.

He heard laughter from below and looked down to see Malfoy attempting to make fun of him, but he could not hear a word he was saying. Harry thought it was just as well; he didn't care to lose his temper so early in the practice. But, then the blond-haired boy touched his wand to his throat and after moving his lips silently, his voice projected up to them loudly as if he were flying right beside them.

"Keep your wits about you, Potter. If you scare that easily then you'll need all the practice you can get before next Saturday." His heckling voice announced. "If you're allowed to play, that is..." he added evilly.

Zach Smith and Tom Hacking could be heard faintly, laughing along with him. Harry made a mental note to give Zach a good hex when he met up with him again, secret defense class or not. Angelina gave them all 'ignore him' looks, and they continued. Unfortunately Ron missed the Quaffle a few times, and this resulted in more taunting from Malfoy, who seemed to be growing quite fond of the charm he was using to project his voice. He was no damned Lee Jordan, but he provided his own colorful commentary on their drill with almost the same enthusiasm.

"Oh-ho there, Weaselbee! I thought Potter's eyesight was bad, but that was just ridiculous! Maybe you should borrow Potter's glasses, eh?"

"Shut up, you bloody ignoramus!" Ron shot back, but of course Malfoy didn't hear, or pretended not to. When his turn was up, Ron zoomed past Harry to line up, a scowl on his freckled face. Harry hated to think it, but Ron was simply not capable of letting things roll off his shoulders—especially while on a broomstick.

The practice had turned into just another opportunity for Malfoy to bait them, Harry realized as they moved on from the passing drill to do some actual scrimmaging. Angelina released the Snitch and Harry got himself in position, flying laps around the pitch, his eyes searching for that familiar glint of gold. The scrimmages started off shakily, with hints of the last practice looming over them as Ron missed save after save. Of course, Malfoy lost no opportunity to berate him for it.

"Predictable. I'll tell you, Johnson, after seeing this I'm not even worried about next week's match. Weasley lets it in every time!"

"Ignore him, Ron!" Angelina bellowed over Malfoy's booming voice.

Ron nodded but he looked like he was positively beside himself with rage.

Harry wished that he could channel some of that angst into his maneuvering skills, because twice more the lanky Weasley brother let the Quaffle escape his net; the last time almost careening into one of the goals himself. Malfoy guffawed hideously, grating on Harry's nerves. He circled the pitch, going though the list of codes in his head.

Number eighteen: Violence will not be tolerated in any form or fashion. Any student who participates in any violent act (however great or small) will risk the permanent disbandment of their group or team, removal from such group or team, or some other more severe course of action; possibly expulsion.

Shame...Harry thought to himself as his eyes roamed the length of the playing field. Ron looks about ready to pound Malfoy's face in. That would be a sight.

"Focus, Ron! You can do it!" Angelina was saying encouragingly. Harry spared a glance at Ron, who was watching his teammates pass the Quaffle back and forth with trepidation. "Just keep your eyes on the Quaffle and stop it!"

Harry caught sight of the Snitch and flew after it. As he was drawing in on the little fluttering thing, he heard Fred and George shout "YEAH RON!" and looked up just in time to see Ron hanging from his broom by one hand. He had kicked the Quaffle away from him and across the field with such force that team members everywhere were scrambling to get out of the way.

Harry was about to join the others' cheering, but was cut off by an enraged "ARGH!" loud as an elephant's roar. His heart sank. Oh no. Tell me he hasn't hit Malfoy. His silent prayer was answered almost immediately by Draco's angry, booming voice. "YOU DID THAT ON PURPOSE, YOU BLOODY DUNDERHEAD!"

Harry abandoned his route and turned around sharply on his broom. Malfoy was storming across the pitch, and Harry could see even from his position far above that his face was set with outrage. Ron climbed back upright on his broom and watched Malfoy too, an odd look of satisfaction on his face. He did not join the rest of the team, who were gathering together, hovering about Malfoy.

Malfoy started in on them, and it was all Hermione could do not to shout "Ignore him!" She was waving her arms and kicking her legs, and at one point she actually used the same charm Malfoy was using but just as she got out "Please ignore--!" she was cut off. Her mouth was moving but no sound was coming to them, and Harry would have been alarmed but he could hear what Malfoy was saying and his attention immediately snapped back to the Slytherin in the middle of the pitch.

"I've come up with a song for you, Weaselbee! I think you'll like it! It's about how you're the worst Keeper Hogwarts has ever seen!"

"Can it, Malfoy!" Angelina shouted, but Draco ignored her.

"I've got a few lyrics worked out, but I can't figure out the last verse. Maybe you can help!" He was holding his hand to his head, as that was probably where the Quaffle had hit him. Harry would've been impressed with Ron's aim if he hadn't been so angrily engrossed in Malfoy's ranting. "...wanted to add a few more verses! But I couldn't find rhymes to go with fat and ugly, for your mother, see?" he was saying. Harry started, gripping his broom and looking nervously at Angelina, who understood what was happening.

"Shut up, Draco. Ron, stay put." Angelina warned, but Ron was already coming down from his position guarding the rings.

"I couldn't fit in USELESS LOSER, either, for your FATHER, you know?" Malfoy said louder, this time. Fred and George looked at each other and then at Harry. Harry shook his head 'no.' Don't, he mouthed to them. Now Ron was at their level, his face almost purple with anger. Harry made a decision and zoomed down, touching the ground in front of Draco. The others joined him.

"Be quiet, now, Malfoy, or you're in trouble," he warned through clenched teeth. "I mean it. Piss off."

Draco lowered the wand from his throat and sneered at Harry. "Always to the rescue, aren't you Potter? You love those Weasels, don't you? I hear you spend holidays and summers there, right?" He scoffed. "Course I suppose you have no choice, not having any respectable family of your own. Being raised by filthy Muggles, you're probably used to the stink of the Weasley hovel, aren't you?"

Harry could feel the struggle behind him; hear the grunts of rage as he guessed that Fred and George were probably being restrained. Hermione had run up to Ron, grabbed his arm and pulled him away towards the opposite end of the field as soon as he landed.

"Oh no; not now!" Harry heard Angelina hiss desperately. He looked past Draco to see Professor Umbridge making her way towards them, dressed in an awful green color that made her impossible to miss.

Draco leered at him as he backed away, a smug look of triumph in his eyes. “Or maybe you don’t mind that Weasley-stink so much because your filthy Mudblood mother smelled exactly the same, right Potter?”

Something in Harry’s brain clicked.

It was as if someone had switched on a red light behind his eyes. He could not feel himself throwing his broom to the ground, or rushing forward, but the next thing he knew he was on Draco in a blazing fit of fury that muted everything around him into white noise. He thought he heard Angelina screaming “GEORGE, HARRY, NO!”

This was only static in his ears as he attempted to pound Draco Malfoy so far into the muddy grass that he remained nothing but a stain on the pitch. His fists connected with flesh and he felt the Slytherin boy’s jaw shift awkwardly under the weight of the blow. Next his other fist buried itself in the arrogant arsehole’s stomach, and Malfoy doubled over with a groan. George was beside Harry, kicking and punching too, and Harry felt as if he would explode.

He heard someone shout “IMPEDIMENTA!” Harry flew back off of Malfoy and hit the ground hard a few feet away. He was up on his feet again quickly, however; chest heaving with unfiltered rage, but Zacharius and Dean were blocking his way. It was Umbridge who had hit him with the Impediment Jinx, and this only served to add fuel the fire. Fred was still being restrained by Katie, Angelina and Alicia, and George was still rolling around with Malfoy.

Umbridge snatched Angelina’s whistle from her mouth and blew on it twice, apparently using the same kind of charm Malfoy had with her wand, so that the sound was even more ear-slitting and thunderous. Everyone covered their ears with their hands, including George and Malfoy, who was scrambling backward away from the twin as quickly as he could.

The quiet calm with which Umbridge spoke next was rather a disturbing change from the chaos that had preceded her.

“Malfoy, do hurry along to the hospital wing. Tom, would you help him please? Thank you.” She turned her cold, simpering eyes on Harry.

"As for you Potter, and you Weasley, please kindly report to Professor McGonagall's office immediately. I will be with you shortly. I need to have a word with your captain first."

Harry allowed himself one sidelong glance at Angelina, who looked as if someone had punched her in the stomach, before turning on his heel and marching with George off the pitch.

Chapter Nine: Voldemort's Wrath

Harry and George made their way up to the castle, breathing like trolls but not saying a word to each other.

All Harry could think about was Malfoy's bloody nose and bruised lip, and it made a cool ball of grim satisfaction swell inside him. Of course coupled with that was his realization that he had just royally screwed himself, and the team...and Angelina...

He prayed that Umbridge wasn't going to retract her agreement to allow them to play, and as they made their way down the hall towards McGonagall's office, his anger settled enough to really begin worrying about his fate.

McGonagall was hurrying along behind them before they even reached her door, taking the scarlet cloak from around her shoulders viciously and jabbing a finger at her door. "IN!" she commanded, and they hurried into the office at her urging. Harry watched her angrily toss the cloak aside into a chair and she whirled around to face them from behind her desk, her eyes ablaze with vehemence. "Explain yourselves!" she snapped, causing George to flinch despite his surly demeanor. "To attack that boy, two on one like that! I have never heard of such disgraceful behavior!"

"Malfoy provoked us," Harry gritted his teeth, feeling the anger from the fight threatening to rise up again.

"Provoked you?" McGonagall slammed her fist onto her desk, causing her biscuit tin to clatter to the floor and burst open. She stepped around, her boots crushing the Ginger Newts mercilessly, and loomed over the boys. "What could he have said that would cause you to behave so--?"

"He insulted my family and Harry's mother!" George shouted back, causing both Harry and the Professor to look at him in disbelief at his nerve. "He said some really messed up stuff, and he's lucky I didn't--!"

"Silence!" she erupted right back. George snarled in protest, but got quiet and remained so. McGonagall took a deep breathe and let it out, pressing her fingers to her temples as if she were fighting off an exploding headache. The boys waited. After a moment of quiet, she spoke again, this time without shouting but still managing to include every bit of menace she'd held before. "Your behavior, no matter what provocation Draco Malfoy offered, was appalling. Throwing your fists around like a pair of uncivilized Muggles--!" Harry flinched. "--is not the answer to any conflict, ever! I thought I'd made myself clear earlier! Do you realize what you've---?"

"Ahem."

Harry's insides grew cold and he, along with George, turned around to face Delores Umbridge, who was standing at the door to the office smiling in that revoltingly sweet way. That smile was a sure sign for Harry that immanent doom was upon them. Minerva narrowed her eyes to mere slits as she regarded the fellow teacher with thinly-masked contempt.

"Yes, Delores?"

"May I offer some help, Minerva?"

"Help? What do you mean 'help?'" She said the word as if it was foreign to her, and Harry wanted desperately for his Head of House to throw that loathsome bitch out of her office. But she only crossed her arms and watched the other woman impatiently as she stepped into the room; that smile was still dripping with poisonous honey.

"I thought you could use the extra authority," the unpleasant woman simpered. "And after all, I did witness the attack."

If it were at all possible, Harry thought Professor McGonagall's nostrils would spit fire. He was waiting for the victory to come; waiting for her to send Umbridge packing, and thought that it was going to happen, too, judging from the look of pure scandal that had settled itself forcibly upon his professor's face.

"Well you thought wrong, Delores." She turned and glared at Harry and George, not skipping a beat, and began to yell at them again as if the other teacher had not interrupted them at all. "You two are in a world of trouble. Your behavior today was disgusting. You had better believe the Headmaster will hear about this, and I'm giving you a week's worth of detention and you had better not so much as glance in Malfoy's direction, or I'll--!"

"Ahem..."

Harry would risk any manner of punishment in order to reach down Umbridge's throat and unclog it with his bare hand. McGonagall looked as if she felt the same, and closing her eyes for the briefest moment, she turned to the other teacher again.

"Yes?"

"Detention, Minerva?" Umbridge chirped as if Professor McGonagall had made an ironic joke. "I think they deserve rather more than that."

"Well I'm afraid it isn't up to you, Delores. You see, I am their Head of House, and I will be handing out their punishment."

"Well, actually, I think it is up to me. Now where is it? Cornelius and I just drew it up this morning..." she tittered absurdly and shook her head, searching through her handbag. "I mean...the Minister and I..." Harry's throat closed. He could feel with each passing second that something awful was about to spring forth from that handbag. He watched Umbridge produce a roll of parchment and unroll it, her nauseating voice ringing in his ears. "Ah, here it is. Yes it was you who inspired me to amend the last decree, Minerva—your adamant disagreement with my decision not to allow this team to reform. Why, I couldn't understand why you would go over my head to Headmaster Dumbledore or why you could not see what I saw—what has clearly been demonstrated this morning..."

She went on but Harry felt that white noise effect coming upon him again, and he stood there, pale and shaking with dread, as Umbridge read out the Minister's signed decree, stating that the High Inquisitor was to have final authority in all punishment or removal of privileges

from students, not to be contradicted by teachers for any reason. With a satisfied little sigh, she rolled the parchment up again and placed it lovingly back into her handbag before blinking over at the lot of them.

“Now, as you can surely understand, these two boys—and this one’s twin, also, I think...yes if he hadn’t been restrained I’m certain he would have attacked poor Malfoy as well—deserve a great deal more than a week’s detention.” McGonagall was silent; her fists were clenched at her sides, her jaw locked in stunned outrage. “Yes, I think I shall have to ban these two, and his brother, from playing Quidditch ever again while they remain at Hogwarts.”

Harry’s eyesight was attacked by white-hot anger, and he felt as if he would faint. “Ban us? From playing?” he whispered weakly, almost to himself. “Ever again?”

“That’s right, Mister Potter. And I’ll be confiscating your brooms as well. I’ve a safe place for them in my office.”

Harry struggled to keep up with what she was saying, but it was as if everything was moving in slow motion. He heard her say that he, Fred, and George were not to play Quidditch again for the entirety of the rest of their years at Hogwarts, and then she uttered “brooms...my office...confiscate...” It didn’t make sense how someone could be so unquestionably evil while acting as if she were doing her victims the biggest favor.

“And the others?” McGonagall croaked.

“Oh, I’m not unreasonable, Minerva!” Umbridge chuckled as if they were old friends having a little disagreement. “I see no reason to keep the rest of them from playing, but violence begets violence, and these rotten apples must be removed from the bunch.”

With that, she gave a little wave and excused herself, having the audacity to tell Minerva to enjoy the rest of her Saturday.

Harry separated from George when they reached the common room and stalked silently to his dorm, where he sat down roughly on his

bed, bringing his knees up to his chin. He fumed this way, alone, for almost an hour before Dean and Seamus showed up. Seamus had obviously been filled in by Dean on the fight, but neither of them looked as if they wanted to tempt Harry's fury by asking him what happened in McGonagall's office. At any rate, Dean looked as if he knew already...he was walking rather stiffly, his head down, and he threw himself on his bed and drew the curtains.

Seamus took up one of Fred and George's Fanged Frisbees and shuffled out again, giving Harry one side-long, sympathetic glance before he disappeared.

Harry let his anger slowly seep out of him, and the overcast morning melted into a dark and rainy afternoon. The rain tapped at his windows lightly as Harry sat there, still in his Quidditch gear, going over the events of the incident again and again. It had all been planned by Malfoy, he just knew it. The malicious little snot had done everything he could to get Harry and the others to react to him, and they'd fallen for it like idiots. Harry could not believe his own foolishness. He called my mother filthy! And poor Ron's family losers! What else was I supposed to do, just sit there and take it? He screamed at himself in his head. He knew the answer to that question, and he dreaded facing the others.

"Umbridge said right there on the pitch that you guys wouldn't be allowed to come back," Dean muttered from behind his curtains.

Harry's thoughts quieted as he looked over at Dean's four-poster, shaking his head with a sigh. "Of course she did..." It didn't surprise him at all that she would announce their punishment to the team even before she'd given it. It had probably been her intention all along, and if Harry were a betting man he'd swear that she and Malfoy plotted it together, the rotten pair of them. "How did Angelina take it?" he asked, now, the beautiful captain suddenly sticking out in his mind.

Dean drew back his curtains and sighed, looking just about as tired and miserable as Harry felt. "I think she would've cried if we weren't all watching her, mate."

Harry cursed under his breath. He had done it, all right. Angelina would never forgive him. He was amazed that Dean was even talking to him. Announcing gloomily that he was hungry and that it was about time for some lunch, Dean dragged himself from his bed and headed towards the door.

"You coming?"

"No..."

"Right. See ya later, then."

Harry gave a half-hearted nod and fell back on the bed, closing his eyes dejectedly. He lay there for a long time mentally kicking himself. Of all the days to lose his temper...of all the days to do something stupid...he picked this day, a week away from their first match. Harry thought about his mother, and wondered if she would really condone him pounding Malfoy's face in for her sake. He just couldn't take anyone, especially that dick-less little git, speaking of her or his father in any way other than with respect and kindness. And Ron's parents...they were the most wonderful and kind people he'd ever met, besides Dumbledore, wizards or not. Malfoy simply had no clue what he was talking about, and Harry thought rather bitterly that it was just as well the kid's own father was such a bloody evil bully.

He heard a creak at the door and looked up to see Ron walking in slowly, a vacant expression on his pale features. Harry sat up and watched his friend cross the room, settling himself on his own bed.

"Where've you been?"

Ron shrugged, not looking at Harry. "Walking." His Quidditch robes were damp, and so was his hair, which hung in his eyes. After a beat, Ron looked up at Harry miserably and muttered, "I'm sorry, Harry."

Harry frowned. "What for? I'm the one who hit Malfoy first."

"No, I did. I kicked the Quaffle right at him." Ron admitted, flinging his broom down angrily. "I was about bloody ready to pop him one meself, and I would've done, too, if it weren't for Hermione!" Harry had

suspected at the time that Ron's save was somehow directed at Malfoy. He still didn't think it mattered. Even if Malfoy had complained to Umbridge, he wouldn't have been able to prove that Ron did it on purpose. Harry pointed this out to his friend, also explaining that if he hadn't attacked Malfoy, they wouldn't be in this mess. "Yeah but if I hadn't been so terrible, he wouldn't have said all those things, and I wouldn't have kicked the Quaffle at his head."

"That's stupid, Ron, of course Malfoy would've said those things no matter how well you did."

Ron looked as if he wanted to argue some more, but relented. He opted instead to tell Harry that Hermione had been hit by a Silencing Charm when she was trying to yell over Draco's insults. "Who d'you think did it?" he asked, though Harry hadn't even gotten his mouth open properly to respond before he spat: "I'll bet it was that Zacharius Smith!"

Harry shrugged. "Maybe. Or it could've been that Tom bloke. He didn't look as if he wanted Malfoy to shut up."

There was a knock at the door and both boys looked over to see Hermione standing there. She asked quietly if she could come in, and though Harry was tempted to tell them both to leave him alone, he nodded.

"Everyone's just coming back from lunch," Hermione said grimly. "Though, no one ate much."

"I don't think I'll have an appetite for a long time." Harry muttered to himself. Ron gave a noncommittal noise of agreement. The room was quiet. The faint sounds of rain on his windowpane served to sap the remainder of Harry's energy. He sat there staring at his Quidditch boots, wishing that he had the spirit to try and talk to his two friends, but he did not.

"You two have got to face everyone eventually, you know," Hermione told them almost timidly. Harry looked up to see her wringing her hands, watching them both imploringly. "Even Fred and George came

down to lunch. Angelina wasn't hard on them...she understood. I mean, she is a bit upset, but who isn't?"

"A bit upset?" Harry snapped suddenly, despite himself. "Hermione, we've been sacked from the team! She doesn't have any players left! The match against Slytherin is next week!"

"Don't yell at me, Harry, I was only saying--!"

"Harry's right, we're doomed." Ron interjected. "I should just quit, as well. Angelina doesn't need me mucking things up worse."

"If you quit, there'll only be three players left," Harry said through clenched teeth. "Don't be a twit, Ron."

"Oh will both of you get a grip?" Hermione yelled at them. "Arguing and being sullen isn't going to make things better. Nor is quitting the team, Ronald." She added this last when Ron opened his mouth to retort. "What we need is action. What we need is--"

"The Room of Requirement..." Harry spoke.

"What?" Ron frowned at both of them. "That's what we need? How's that gonna help us beat Slytherin next Saturday?"

"No, Ron, screw next Saturday's match," Harry told him, ignoring the ginger-haired boy's offended expression. He sat up more and pulled off his Quidditch gloves, the energy he'd depleted fighting Malfoy slowly coming back. "We need to have a meeting. As soon as possible."

"Who does?" Ron still looked puzzled.

"I can spread the word," Hermione said anxiously, ignoring Ron as well. "I can start right now."

"Can you tell everyone by dinner?"

"Sure. Ronald, you have to help."

"Right." Ron, catching on at last, nodded seriously.

Harry was experiencing a surge of determination and restlessness now, and he stood up from the bed to begin pacing the length of the room. His brain began to work, the memory of what his godfather had said the night before playing back at him like Muggle film. All you have to do is walk past the wall three times and think hard on...on what? Harry thought, frowning and cursing under his breath.

"What's in the bean, Harry?" Hermione asked, watching him.

"What was Sirius going to say before Umbridge tried to catch him?" Harry muttered, more to himself than to her.

"You're sure it was Umbridge?"

"Of course I'm sure. She may not have known who he was, or who he was talking to, but she knew someone was using the floo to gain access to the common room and she was trying to catch him. I'll bet she suspected it was someone for me, though..."

"What if she somehow intercepted your letter from Sirius? Maybe she read it?"

Harry nodded his agreement, clenching his fists angrily. His right hand was throbbing, but when he looked at it, he realized that it was because of the small cut on his knuckle where Malfoy's tooth got him, and not from the now healed 'I will not tell lies' carved into his skin. He thought about both Malfoy and Umbridge, and the more he thought about them the more determined he became. He was squeezing his fist so tight that the scar on the back of his hand gleamed white from the blood rushing down to his cramped fingers.

"Tell everyone to meet us in the Room of Requirement tomorrow night after dinner."

"But how will we get in?" Ron wanted to know. "What're we s'posed to think hard about?"

"Harry, what happened last year?" Hermione questioned him.

Harry thought back. "We were just standing out in the hall."

Hermione frowned. "I can't believe you just stood there in the middle of the hall with fire whiskey!" she berated him, momentarily setting aside their more important query. "What if you'd been caught? You would've been expelled for sure!"

"I know..." Harry admitted. "I tried to tell them that, but they kept insisting that we had to use the--" Harry stopped, thinking hard. What had George done? "Oh! He kept saying 'we need somewhere to finish this baby off...'" Hermione scowled, but Harry ignored her. "Fred was pacing...Ha! I think all we have to do is think hard about what it is we need the room to be. I'll bet when they were running from Filch they just desperately needed someplace to hide, so it turned into a cupboard."

"That makes a lot of sense," Hermione agreed, as if it should've been obvious. "So we'll try it, then."

Without warning she punched him in the arm, hard. Harry glared at her but soon realized that she'd only done it as a delayed reaction to his adventure with the twins, and as a belated warning never to do anything so stupid and reckless on school grounds again. Ironic, Harry thought, we're about to set ourselves up to get about thirty kids expelled...

Hermione waited for Ron to change out of his Quidditch gear and together they headed off to tell the others about the meeting. Harry told them not to be too obvious, and Hermione suggested that they start by telling their own house members and then spreading the word through everyone else as quickly and quietly as possible. They left Harry alone, finally.

He began to plan out what he was going to do at their first meeting. He wrote a few things down, deciding that the Disarming Charm, Expelliarmus, was what they should learn first. He made notes like these for a few hours before he realized that it was nearing dinner

time and neither Ron nor Hermione had come back yet. Carefully hiding his notes under his mattress with his Invisibility Cloak, Harry debated with himself on whether or not he wanted to go down to the Great Hall.

On the one hand, he really wanted to talk to Angelina. He felt he owed her an explanation, as well as an apology, for his cock-up. Hearing Hermione tell him that Fred and George had faced her and she'd understood why they'd reacted to Malfoy was a relief, but Harry knew that in the end the fact still remained that they had no team left, and it was mostly his fault. He had acted first, and he sat in the dark convincing himself that if it hadn't been for his lead, things wouldn't have escalated the way it did. But still...he relished the memory of beating the piss out of Malfoy.

He thought about the last time he and Angelina had spoken alone together, and the gentle yet assertive kiss she'd given him in the quiet of the common room. The memory made his stomach flutter. The fluttering could've been hunger, but Harry chose to give it the more romantic explanation. He cursed himself for being such an idiot. No wonder Cho chose Cedric over me, he thought gloomily. He always seemed to keep his cool and he probably would've just ignored Malfoy. He would've made sure we got to play like I should've done. Fuck all, Angelina was counting on me!

The thought of Cedric forced Harry's mind back into dark territory, and he found himself thinking about Voldemort. His dreams had everything to do with the murderous wizard; Harry was sure of it. That corridor and the door he could never reach...this was a real place. The thought clicked in his head without warning and the boy knew it to be true almost instinctively. He was trying to gain access to something through that door. Something important. Something he wanted desperately. It wasn't Harry running down that corridor. It was Voldemort, and whatever it was he wanted, Harry had to find some way to keep him from getting it.

He did not go down to dinner. Ron had come back to tell him that he and Hermione had gotten to nearly everybody, and that by the next day everything would be in place. He and Neville tried to entice him to come to dinner with them: Ron pointed out that he in no way wanted

to face Malfoy or the other students after what had happened, and that he was choosing his stomach over his humiliation, but Harry only explained that Ron wasn't the one who got banned from playing ever again by participating in a petty fight.

Night fell and the rain subsided.

Harry attempted to try and write more of Snape's essay, but very quickly gave up, having no desire to pretend dedication to the subject. He realized that he had been sitting around all day in his Quidditch gear; he was filthy and certain parts of him ached a little from the fight. He decided to take a shower and go to bed early. There was no point in working himself up to talk to people—he would do that tomorrow. He would apologize to the team and talk privately with Angelina. He hoped that she wasn't too upset with him, and vowed silently to help her make up for the loss of her three best players in any way he could. Finding a new Seeker and two Beaters before the next match was going to be hard, and even if they did chances were Angelina wouldn't be able to practice them enough to win Saturday. But Harry had to try and help.

Ignoring the hollow feeling in his stomach from not eating, Harry made his way quietly down to the boys' showers. He was thankful that not many people were in there—just a couple of first years Harry had never spoken to before, who saw him and stared but didn't attempt to bother him. He found a stall and turned on the hot water, not realizing until the soothing spray was gently hitting his skin how cold he'd been. As he was sticking his head into the steamy stream, his mind cleared and he felt relaxed for the very first time that day. Harry absentmindedly lathered his sponge and began to wash himself, not really paying attention to any one thing, but letting all of his worry and frustration escape over the top of the shower curtain along with the steam from the water.

He was feeling ten times better and his muscles were softening and loosening up when he got a sharp, searing jolt of pain in his forehead—right through his scar. Harry grimaced and cursed loudly, dropping the soapy sponge and leaning forward. The water ran over his eyes and face, making his vision even blurrier than it normally was without his glasses. The pain persisted, growing more intense as

he lifted his hands and pressed them against the tile before him. In addition to the severe ache in his scar, Harry felt anger. Not his own...someone else's. Voldemort's. He knew this, even as he was fighting these feelings.

"Urghhh..." he growled, gritting his teeth and constricting his fingers so that they clawed the slippery tile futilely. "Why haven't they got it yet? Time is running out!" he hissed, his own voice sounding miles away as this strange, inhuman sound escaped his lips. Imbeciles! Incompetents! FOOLS! Harry thought wildly, his head feeling like it would split apart from the pain. There was a blinding crescendo of fury and panic that hit him hard, causing him to slide down to the floor of the stall with the water driving his hair into his eyes as it hit his bowed head. A second later, the feelings eased off and were gone—leaving Harry panting slowly on his knees in the shower.

Chapter Ten: Apologies. And the Real Kiss.

"Banned..." Angelina heard herself say numbly.

She'd been repeating the word in her head over and over for a while, now, and when she spoke it aloud it did nothing to diminish the impact of what had happened. What on Earth had Harry been thinking? Hadn't she warned him? Hadn't she warned them all not to let themselves get suckered by Malfoy?

All right, the stupid git said some pretty rotten things about her two best mates' family, and Harry's poor dead mother, but Angelina thought stubbornly that no matter what he'd said it was no reason to double-team him! When she had seen Umbridge walking calmly across the pitch, her hideous green tweed coat making her look like an enormous cartoon frog, her stomach did a back flip and she knew it was over. Angelina watched as though from the end of a tunnel as Harry punched Malfoy in the face and stomach while Fred pulled the Slytherin boy's hair and twisted his arm back. She felt a million miles away as Umbridge hit Harry with and Impediment Jinx and barely blinked when the woman snatched her whistle from her.

It was only the shrill sound of the thing that brought her back to reality.

And Angelina had never felt truer dread than the moment when the awful teacher turned to her, smiling sweetly, and uttered: "I need to have a word with your captain, first."

Now she was sitting in the common room, repeating that word in her head. The other team members had been sitting with her earlier that day, right after the incident. She hadn't really known what to tell them. The only thing was to speak on what she knew, and that was the fact that they now had no Seeker and no Beaters, and the Slytherin match was a week away. No one bothered to ask how in bloody hell she was going to find replacements by Tuesday night's practice, and it was just as well. The first match of the season, which normally held so much excitement for Angie, would be a sour event indeed.

Angelina had spent most of that afternoon going through a myriad of emotions. She swung from furious at everyone; Umbridge, Malfoy,

George, Harry, and the lot of them; to extremely depressed, to completely numb. She kept hoping that it was all just a dream; that she would wake up and discover that none of it had ever happened.

The news had spread like wildfire among the other students, and she walked through the halls with her head down and her eyes focused on the floor. The Slytherins sneered and the other houses speculated and whispered scandalously. The worst part was that Angelina went the whole day without seeing the one person she really wanted to talk to: Harry.

Fred told her at lunch that he and George hadn't seen the messy-haired kid either.

"We both went our own ways after that clobbering we got in McGonagall's office," George said, bitterly. The three of them were huddled together, picking at their food and ignoring everyone else. "He looked like he was still a bit fired up. Me as well."

"That must've been rough," Angelina offered, squashing the grapes on her plate with a fork. "McGonagall and Umbridge...talk about a pair."

"Actually, old Minerva went pretty easy on us at first, which ain't saying much, but I could've done a week's detention easy rather than having my ruddy broom stolen by that wench." They watched George squeeze the daylights out of his tuna sandwich with a disgusted scowl on his normally handsome face. He Scourgified the mess from his hand with his wand and tossed the plate aside.

"What, has he gone and locked himself in his room or something?" Angelina asked, rather annoyed. "Doesn't he know he's got to face us eventually?"

"Maybe he doesn't want to see Malfoy. Might have a bit of the fight still left in him," Fred offered darkly, shrugging his lean shoulders. "I know I do. If Katie and Alicia hadn't been holding me back I'd have done Harry one better and kicked that sod in the bollocks."

Angelina gave Fred a sharp look and crushed another grape.

"You should go and talk to him, Angie," George suggested as they were returning from lunch. "Tell him we're not gonna toss him off the Astronomy Tower or any'fin."

"Speak for yourself..." Katie said, passing them through the portrait hole.

Angelina sighed and cast a longing look at the stairs that led to the boys' dorms. She thought about it for a moment, but decided to give Harry more time. She tried to study, tried to make a list of candidates for the now depressingly unoccupied Seeker position, and even tried to think of a way to get back at Umbridge. She heartily entertained the idea of asking the twins to go ahead with their threat to put that Gassy Goose stuff in the teacher's tea, but decided that it was a really stupid thing to do. Umbridge would know instantly who was responsible, and then they could kiss Quidditch for the Gryffindors goodbye forever.

When she still hadn't seen Harry before dinner, Angelina's piss poor mood took its final plunge.

He's avoiding me, I know it, she thought miserably. He probably thinks I'm going to treat him like a child or blame him for what happened. Sure, Angelina admitted that her first instinct was to berate him but good. In fact, had this happened at any time in the years before, she knew she probably would have threatened to throw him off the tower. But now...all she wanted was to talk to him, try and understand his position in all of this, and most of all be close to him the way she'd been the night before when he listened to her explain about Malfoy seeing her playbook.

Hermione approached her as she was about to sit, an urgent look on her face. "Harry says you're to have that emergency practice tomorrow night, Angelina," the girl whispered, lifting her bushy eyebrows pointedly to emphasize the hidden meaning behind her words.

Angelina frowned at her. "Emergency...?"

"Yes, after dinner on the seventh floor."

With that the fifth year walked away to join Ginny and Ronald at their end of the table, looking back once to make sure Angie had taken it all in. Fred and George joined her soon after, also looking urgent but also excited.

"Did you hear?" Fred whispered, leaning forward and picking a buttered roll from one of the platters in the center of the table. "We're meeting tomorrow night. Gonna start learning ways to blast Voldy into oblivion I expect!"

"Shh!" George hissed. "You want the whole school to hear?"

Angelina caught on, her heart rate growing as she realized that finally they were going to start their secret society against Umbridge's asinine teachings. "About bloody time!" she whispered, finally letting go of some of her misery. She instinctively turned her enthused gaze down to the end of the table where Harry normally sat with Ginny, Ron, and Hermione, but found to her disappointment that he was not sitting among them. "I've got to talk to him..." she muttered to herself.

The twins went on chatting excitedly about the meeting, pausing only to glare at Malfoy, who made a dramatic entrance half-way through dinner sporting an exaggerated limp and purple bruises on his lip and eye. Angelina tried to join in the boys' conversation; they were listing off all sorts of complicated and advanced defensive spells that they wanted to learn, completely disregarding the fact that Harry was only a fifth year and didn't know half that stuff. Harry stayed in the back of her mind as she listened to them, and she made a decision. She excused herself early and left the Great Hall before dessert, determined to make Harry talk to her.

She made it up to his dorm and knocked purposefully on his door.

"Harry, open up, it's Angelina."

There was no answer. She knocked again, but she got nothing but silence. Opening the door a crack and peeking in, Angelina saw that the room was empty. The overhead light was on, and one of the

windows was open, relieving some of the heavy warmth caused by the furnace in the center of the room. She eyed the room hesitantly before stepping inside, suppressing a smirk at how messy boys were. The five beds were all unmade, and there were trainers, crumbled parchment, discarded jumpers and trousers everywhere. Hedwig the snowy white owl flew in through the open window and perched herself on the headboard of what must've been Harry's bed.

Sighing, Angelina stepped forward and sat down on the soft mattress. The bed was warm. She imagined that he'd been laying on it for the better part of the day. She could faintly see the outline of his body imprinted on the sheets and twisted scarlet comforter. Angelina reached out and stroked Hedwig gently. The owl hooted softly. She always envied Harry this beautiful creature. Her own owl was dark gray with a few errant white feathers here and there, and was for the most part a pretty good bird, but Harry's was magnificent.

"Where is that stubborn owner of yours, Hedwig?" she asked the wise creature. Hedwig arched her neck and ruffled her feathers in answer. "Is he still angry? You think he'll tell me to sod off?" A bemused hoot.

Angelina waited in the quiet, hoping that his other roommates wouldn't come before he did. She'd have a tough job explaining why she hadn't just waited for him in the common room. It would seem kind of mad to anyone else--her secret desire to glimpse Harry when he wasn't around. But she admitted to herself as she looked around that it was exactly what she was doing. His trunk lay open; exposing a mess of thrown-together objects that Angelina recognized as clothes, books, rolls of parchment, and supplies. She caught a headline from an old Daily Prophet issue sticking out from underneath a stack of dirty jeans. His Quidditch boots lay abandoned next to the trunk where he'd tossed them earlier before going down to the showers. Next to those were his Quidditch robes. Harry's Firebolt was missing of course...Umbridge had it. She saw an open Potions textbook on the desk next to the bed, accompanied by a bit of parchment that had been attacked madly by the quill of an unfocused student doing an essay that was meant as punishment more than anything else. The familiar-looking round spectacles rested on top of the book; they seemed way too small for the face they normally sat on.

There was an old pocket knife sitting on the windowsill. Angelina reached out and touched her fingertips to it. She wondered what exactly Harry used it for. Boys had things like these; objects of utility that they either rarely used and just appreciated having, or that they used all the time. The knife looked worn on the outside. She flipped the blade out and saw that it was exceptionally shiny. A magic blade? Bewitched to remain sharp for years and years? She replaced the blade and put the knife carefully back where she found it.

She got up and walked around the bed, warming her hands by the furnace and sighing. She still didn't know what she was going to do about the team. Harry and the twins were a devastating loss both to the team's morale and to their winning edge. Her plan was that if she couldn't have the youngest and best Seeker at Hogwarts then she could at least get his take on who should replace him.

"Angelina?" she jumped, her eyes darting up to rest on Harry, who had appeared in the doorway with wet hair, clutching a drying towel around his waist. "What are you doing in here?"

She faltered a bit, somewhat thrown off by the sight of him in nothing but a towel. Her eyes lingered unabashedly on the scar he still had from the dragon task that made a sweeping, jagged pink pattern up his left bicep and around his shoulder where it disappeared down his back. He looked at her rather darkly at first, but then she saw his cheeks turn crimson and he averted his gaze, moving carefully around her to retrieve his glasses from the desk. As he leaned over to pick them up she saw the completed pattern from the scar arch severely and stop just beneath his shoulder blade.

Taking a breath and shaking her eyes away from the boy's flesh, she plunged ahead bravely.

"I haven't seen you all day. We should talk, don't you think?"

Harry's cheeks were still flushed, though traces of the ominous look he'd given her when he entered still lingered among the bashful gaze he cast on her now. He shifted awkwardly on his bare feet, his hair dripping noticeably. The light from the lamp overhead caught the

drops of water still waiting to evaporate from his muscular shoulders rather dramatically. Angelina was having a hard time keeping her stern resolve, looking at him this way. Her attraction to him never felt so real.

“I-I just haven’t felt like seeing anyone, that’s all.”

“Why not? Fred and George--”

“Yeah Hermione told me you guys talked. They’re all right, though; they weren’t the ones who started it. It was me—I blew it for the team.” Harry let out an exasperated stream of breath and finally looked at her directly. “I just wanted Malfoy to belt up, you know? But he just kept on being...”

“Being Malfoy?” she offered grimly.

“Exactly. I knew that, and I went ahead and punched him.”

“Bet that felt good,” Angelina chanced a small grin. To her relief he returned it. She watched him tighten the towel around himself with one hand and move his wet hair out of his face with the other. “Look, yeah you screwed up.” He scoffed, rolling his eyes at himself. “But I know Malfoy was asking for it. What he said about Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and your mother...”

She saw him clench his jaw at the mention of his mother. Angelina knew the story of his parents’ death; everyone did. She had always felt very removed from it, however, even when she met this curious boy. But now she’d been slowly getting closer to him she admitted to herself that she wanted to know as much as possible about him—starting with his take on the legend that had come to define him in the minds of every witch and wizard in their world.

“Okay, I won’t lie and say that if Malfoy did that again I wouldn’t react the same,” he admitted to her after a moment, sounding impressively mature about his own faults. “But I am really really sorry about all this.” He let out a breath imploringly. “Really.”

Angelina looked into his eyes and found his genuine desire to make it up to her evident there. This made her chest swell somewhat with girlish yearning that the tall Gryffindor rarely allowed in herself. The little twerp, she thought with amusement. He's got his tricks, doesn't he? Wonder if he meant to show himself off like that to make me not want to kick him in the arse? Snapping out of thoughts like these, Angelina perked up and smiled at him.

"So word on the street is someone's having a secret meeting tomorrow after dinner? Any chance I'm invited?"

He returned her smile. "We're meeting in the Room of Requirement at eight."

"The what?" Harry explained about the room, mentioning that it had been there last year for them when they had their little adventure during the Yule Ball. She watched the wall as he got himself dressed, pulling on an old tee-shirt and some jeans. He padded around in his bare feet to sit on the bed next to her, his hair still wet and hanging in his eyes. She listened as he told her that his plan was to start with the basics, like a simple Disarming Charm, and then move on to eventually getting everyone up to conjuring a Patronus. "Wow," she whispered when he'd finished, shaking her head in awe. "You've really put some thought into this, haven't you?"

He nodded modestly. "Been thinking about it all day, actually."

"I'm glad you're doing this Harry..." she smiled at him, looking into his crystal clear, startling green eyes. "So--" she continued after a beat. "--you've conjured a Patronus before? What's it look like?"

"It's very bright; it's this white light that sort of beams out everywhere. Mine is in the shape of a stag, like my Dad's animagus form..." Harry trailed off and closed his eyes briefly. He winced as he reached up to rub his scar.

"What's wrong?"

"Uh...my scar hurts a bit," he said vaguely, instinctively lowering his hand again at her question. He shrugged and tried to smile. "It's nothing."

"Doesn't seem like nothing..." Angelina lifted her own fingers. He stiffened, as he had the last time she'd touched him there, but remained quiet as she brushed his damp black hair aside and ran a cool finger along the jagged bolt of lightening. "Seems like it's really bothering you. How often does this happen?"

It was an innocent enough question, but she could tell he was hesitating. His eyes narrowed as if he were internally debating with himself on whether or not he should answer her. He looked as if the issue was whether or not to trust her with some information that she guessed not many people had. Angelina made the simple yet meaningful gesture of sliding closer to him on the bed. Their legs and shoulders touched; their body heat mixed and created the feelings of intimacy and safety between them. Her fingers were still on his skin, and she let them move up from his scar and lace themselves in his ebony hair. Harry closed his eyes again, swallowing as she brushed it completely out of his eyes before bringing her palm back down to his cheek and applying gentle pressure. Slowly...she brought his face closer to hers. She could see his heart beating through the thin material of his tee shirt and felt her own about to overwhelm her as well.

Their lips touched. Angelina felt a chill travel from her hair follicles to the tips of her toes. She closed her own eyes and allowed her tongue to slip warmly into his mouth, where it met with his. He reacted unsurely at first, almost pulling back, but soon caught on. Harry's shoulders relaxed and his mouth responded in time with hers; she could tell he was feeling his way through this. Her hand caressed his warm cheek, her chest swelling and deflating slowly with breathless hunger.

It wasn't long before Harry returned this hunger, actually reaching up to wrap his arms around her waste, pulling her closer to him with possessive force that excited her and made her body tingle warmly. She had only had a tiny bit more experience than he, but she had thought she was the leader in this. When the boy deepened the kiss

however, she knew that he had taken the lead with his desire to explore his own sexual prowess. Even if his actions were mostly fueled by curiosity, it felt no less thrilling to have him press her into him like that. And, she thought as her breasts rose and fell against his chest with her heavy breathing, perhaps he did like her as much as she liked him.

Angelina felt his hands gripping her shirt gently as he tilted his head and plunged in, his movements becoming bolder with each passing second. She was dizzy from the heat in the room and the body heat between them. They were both so damned excited about this new way of being in the same space with each other. After the longest time of kissing, they finally let each other go to catch their breath quietly. Harry grinned at her with lips that were flushed pink like the scar on his shoulder and back. She returned the sentiment, biting her own somewhat tender lips sheepishly.

"Hey, Harry you still up here mate--?" They were startled half to death by Ron, who had come bursting in on them, actually looking agreeable for the first time that day. He stopped short, eyeing them curiously. "Whoops."

Harry cleared his throat and stood up, attempting to look nonchalant. "What's up, Ron?"

"Eh..." Ron's blue eyes went from Angelina to Harry and back to Angelina. He shifted on his feet, probably realizing that he had interrupted something, but at Harry's urging look he shrugged. "Dumbledore's back. Saw'r'im at dinner. That's all I was gonna say. But, uh...y-you two look like you're talking about something important, so I'll just..."

Angelina watched, very embarrassed, as Ron backed out of the room, grinning stupidly at Harry as if he'd just opened a chocolate frog with a particularly rare wizard card in it. Harry sat down again and offered her an apologetic smile.

"Sorry..." his cheeks had grown scarlet again and he licked his lips, running a hand through his now semi-dry hair. He had no idea that he

had just done two of the things Angelina loved seeing him do, and she leaned over quickly to peck him on the mouth one last time.

"If you don't want to tell me about your scar, you don't have to."

"It's not that I don't want to tell you. I-I dunno, I think maybe..." Harry was still recovering from their new-found intimacy with each other and his smile lingered. He looked off into space as he thought about what he was saying. "Well...can we talk more later? Tomorrow; and I'll tell you about it."

"Sure." Angelina ruffled his hair and stood up.

He grabbed her hand, standing up too. "Hey." He got very close to her, his eyes flickering to her lips and back into her eyes again. Swallowing a little, Harry gave her a soft, tender kiss on those lips before smiling and reaching up to flip a lock of her own hair into her face. "There. How d'you like it?"

She hit him playfully on the arm and left the room, feeling so very much better than she had all damned day.

Chapter Eleven: Girlfriend. Boyfriend.

Harry watched with a satisfied grin on his face as Angelina attempted to control her laughter.

She'd been at it for several minutes now, as had Ron, and even Ginny despite herself. The youngest Weasley was a bit more restrained than the other two, attempting to mask hers under a cough at Hermione's disapproving looks. But it was to see Angelina's beautiful face light up with amusement that Harry had decided on his impromptu imitation of Umbridge during their brainstorming session in the common room that Sunday. They had spent most of the morning comprising a list of candidates to fill the empty team spots. Among the kids that would try out for Angelina at Tuesday's drill would be Ginny. The process had been a bit arduous, if not entirely stressful.

It had just popped into his head—how ridiculous this was, and how if one really thought about it, Umbridge was pretty comical with her hideous outfits and that little bow in her hair. Everyone was being quiet and seemed off in their own worlds; even Hermione, who had stopped reading her Ancient Runes textbook and looked off out the window. They were all worried about Quidditch, and simultaneously excited about the meeting they were to have that night. Hermione and Ron had finished spreading the word, with help from Angelina, Ginny, and the twins. Now all they could do was wait until it was time. Harry admitted to himself that he was rather nervous about it. It was to relieve these nerves, and bring up the mood in the room, that he'd decided to do the impression.

"Oh, do it again, Harry!" Angelina urged, ignoring Hermione's frown.
"What else did she say?"

Harry cleared his throat and adopted a look of sticky-sweet evil. "Violence begets violence!" Ron cackled girlishly, his freckled face turning pink with laughter as Harry shook a disapproving finger in Hermione's face. "These rotten apples must be removed from the bunch!" He said in a high-pitched Umbridge-meets-Grubbly-Plank voice. Hermione swatted at Harry's finger and attempted to look stern, failing miserably when Harry simpered: "There'll be no need to talk!

Temper, temper, Miss Granger! Ten points from Gryffindor for being smarter than me!"

Soon Harry had the lot of them giggling madly, and he joined in. They were drawing curious looks from some of the other Gryffindors lounging around. When the noise died down and they'd all caught their breath again, Ron wiped a tear from the corner of his eye and sighed happily.

"Ah. Bloody brilliant, that was, Harry."

"Thanks." Harry settled down in his chair again, glancing at Angelina, who was watching him with a content smile on her face. He was glad to see it—making her feel better was important to him today. He knew she really had a lot on her plate, thanks to him. Ron asked what everyone reckoned Umbridge would do if she ever caught them doing the impression.

"Probably draw up another idiotic decree..." Ginny offered, rolling her eyes.

"Educational Decree number one-hundred and one!" Harry squeaked, sounding a bit like Dobby the house elf that time. "No student shall ever make fun of the all-powerful Delores Umbridge or else!"

"Well you'd better stuff it before she comes in here," Hermione said seriously.

Harry shrugged but did as he was told. They all resumed their studying; Harry giving Snape's essay one last try. He read the same sentence over and over again, not really taking any of it in. He rather enjoyed having the book, though, because it afforded him secret glances at Angelina without being obvious. He had not forgotten their little 'study session' the night before. It had kept him up half the night, to be honest. After he'd told Ron about his scar hurting in the shower, the lanky Weasley had been concerned and had told him that he should go straight to Dumbledore, but soon could not resist asking what he had interrupted when he'd come in to tell Harry about the Headmaster's return.

"Nothing..." Harry had replied, smiling to himself. Ron had called him a ruddy liar.

Harry tossed and turned as he had many other nights, thinking about Voldemort and his scar, and Dumbledore...and Sirius. But at the tip top of his mountain of worry was a cheery, snowy peak—this new and rather unexpected development with Angelina Johnson. He had been surprised by himself more than once when it concerned her, but last night he'd hit the all time pinnacle of startling behavior on his part. Last year, Harry had found it damned difficult to gather the courage to even speak to Cho Chang, let alone ask her to the Yule Ball. And of course his experience with Angelina that night had elevated his confidence level, but he had chalked it up to being drunk off his arse on fire whiskey, nothing more. Discovering that Angelina liked him had forced him to examine some things about himself more closely. He was, in his opinion, just a sloppy fifth year with too many personal problems to be believed, but she liked him, didn't she?

Ah, girls... He liked them very much. He loved the softness of their skin; their pleasant smell. He liked the way they used their hands and faces when they talked. Angelina had a cute little thing she did with her lips that made his heart race when she was talking about something she loved, like Quidditch. She would bite her lower lip and run her tongue along it as if she were hungry to get out on the pitch and fly. She moved her hands gracefully, touching his arm, or resting her chin in her palm as she spoke. He liked to watch her when she was listening to him talk, too. Her eyes held so much in them...interest and heart-felt sympathy and stubborn passion and...Harry sighed a little too loudly, causing several people to glance up at him. He cleared his throat and buried his face in his book again.

Sure, he was still a little awkward, especially around Angelina—he didn't know what he was going to say from one moment to the next, and it was funny because only last year that had been Cho. But, underneath that awkwardness, he was beginning to pay more attention to things he'd missed before for some reason. It seemed his senses and thoughts had changed concerning the lot of them, girls, and it was quite thrilling when it wasn't a little odd. For instance, he found that Ginny was coming on to be quite the attractive girl. Her

hair, in particular, was beautiful. He'd been around the Weasley's long enough; red hair was nothing new to him by now, but hers shone with a kind of effervescence that the others' simply didn't have. And Cho was still beautiful, of course. He hadn't seen her today, or the day before, but he remembered fondly how great she always looked.

Harry was paying more attention to himself as well. Certain parts more than others...

Maybe this was a normal thing for any fifteen-year-old boy but it certainly hadn't been for him until now. It wasn't having these thoughts that concerned him—it was the thing that happened to him when he had them. Like when Angelina touched his scar, and ran her slender fingers through his hair. And when he pulled her closer to him and felt her soft flesh...those two supple, ample breasts pressing against him...

Harry adjusted himself in his seat, hoping that his school things were arranged properly in his lap.

He chanced another look in her direction. She was deep in thought, her hand poised over her parchment. The quill was slipping from her grip slightly, and Harry got the funny feeling she was on the same thought-pattern as him. He smiled faintly.

Kissing...

That was something he hadn't done a lot of—well, any of—until this point. It was bloody great. Harry mused that whoever thought up kissing was brilliant. The first couple of times Harry had been too stunned to really feel anything other than disbelief. When she kissed him in the common room before dinner the third time, he woke up to the possibility that if he played his cards right he might get to do this with her all the time. It was so nice. Almost like flying; he felt free and above it all when her lips were on his. Perhaps it had been the immense relief he felt that she was even still talking to him last night that made him react to her the way he did. Finding her in his room when he returned from the showers had been just what he needed, and he hadn't even realized it until the moment he saw her. Despite

the fact that he was still reeling from that horrible pain in his scar, Harry was so glad to see her that he almost forgot he was half-naked.

He could feel her eyes on him the whole time...yeah he knew with certainty that he wanted to kiss her when she touched him. It had been the perfect thing; almost erasing all that muck in his head as he attempted to hold onto the feeling for as long as possible. He held on all right—to her. Harry covered up the huge grin now spreading across his face with his book as he let his eyes trace the lines of her lean body folded leisurely on the couch.

"That's it," Ginny sighed and stood up, stretching. "I'm going for a walk. I can't sit indoors all day."

"That's a good idea." Hermione stood up, too. "Mind you, this book is fascinating, but I think it might be time for a little break from it."

She reached over and hit Ron across the back of his head—he'd been dosing off, pretending to read one of the books Professor Bins had assigned them. When he jerked awake he rubbed the back of his head and squinted up at her with annoyance.

"Whaddaya want?"

"Fancy a walk?"

"Sure." Ron yawned and flipped the book closed. He stretched and stood up. "Coming Harry?"

Harry didn't think it would be a good idea to stand just then. He nodded, distracted by Angelina, who was crossing out names on her parchment. "Uh....yeah, be with you in a bit." He lifted his essay for them to see. "Just about done."

"All right, meet us by the lake, will you?" Hermione patted him on the shoulder, seemingly proud that he was choosing to finish his homework before joining them.

"Go on."

The three students left and there was now only Harry and Angelina sitting opposite each other in the quiet common room. Other students who'd been studying around them earlier were now walking towards the portrait hole or heading up to their rooms, having either finished what they had been working on or choosing to take a break like Ginny had. There was one lone third year, snoozing in an oversized chair by a window.

Harry sat still for a moment, watching the third year, before deciding that the kid was definitely asleep. Lazy Sunday afternoons were one of the things that he loved about being at Hogwarts. Back on Privet Drive, his Aunt Petunia would have him doing tedious chores all day to keep him out of his uncle Vernon's hair. Harry watched a beam of sunlight arch its way through the window and land on Angelina's face. She squinted away from the light and shifted in her seat, still hovering over the parchment she held with the list of candidates.

"How's it coming along?" he asked, startling her out of her thoughts.

"Oh, um..." she sighed distractedly. "All right I guess. I just wanted to narrow it down a bit before Tuesday."

"It's good though, right? That so many people signed up to try out?"

"Yeah I suppose." She furrowed her brow sighed. "Though most of them are first years that've never even ridden on a broomstick before..."

"Oh." Harry scratched his head with an apologetic frown. He stood up finally and walked across to her, taking a seat next to her on the chaise lounge. "I'll bet someone good turns up. You might even find some better players than we were..."

She scoffed at his weak attempt to humor her. "I'm done for. Just say it."

"No you're not. Just have the tryouts and then practice as much as you can before next Saturday's match. You'll be fine."

"What about the...you know..." she glanced around to make sure they wouldn't be overheard, "...our meetings?"

"We'll make it work, don't worry."

She bit her lip skeptically at his optimism, but nodded. Harry had an overwhelming urge to touch her just then, and he did, reaching out to dance his fingers off a lock of her hair. It was shining brightly in that stubborn shard of light coming in from the window. Angelina watched his hand travel uncertainly down to rest on her knee. It was weird—he didn't feel quite confident enough to be doing this, but at the same time he couldn't help it.

"Harry--?"

"You wanna go for a walk with me?" he cut her off, his heart pounding annoyingly through his shirt and jumper. "It's getting a bit nippy, but the sun is shinning."

She smiled at him. "Sure."

"I've been meaning to ask you..." Harry began as they made their way down the last set of stairs that led to the entrance hall, where the great doors had been thrown open. Sunlight was winking at them from just above the doors' threshold, though there was a slight wind that made some kids wear light jumpers or jackets. Harry shoved his hands in his pockets, momentarily stuck for how to phrase his question without being too forward or...hasty? He cast a sidelong gaze at her as she zipped up her royal blue hoody, appreciating the contrast of the dramatic color with her skin.

"Ask me what?" she prodded when he still hadn't finished his thought after they stepped out into the sun.

Harry breathed in. He'd been thinking about it all last night and all that morning. "Well, now that I've been sacked from ever playing Quidditch again," his voice took on a bitter edge when he said those words, "I was wondering if you think it really matters if we...er...you know..."

"Hold hands? Kiss in public?" she finished for him. He blushed furiously and nodded, planting his gaze on the path ahead of them. It was Angelina's turn to be silent for a while. They walked on, following the path that led them to the lake, where he could just make out Ginny, Ron, and Hermione throwing stones across the water. The surface rippled several times, and then finally a giant tentacle emerged, catching Ron's stone and swinging it back at him. Harry was beginning to think that maybe she didn't want to talk about it; after all she had so many other things on her mind, and so did he for that matter. But he felt her warm hand slip softly into his and their fingers entwined. "I don't see what we've got to hide. It's not a crime to like someone..."

Harry smiled, but thought that maybe it was. He didn't like to imagine what kind of things Malfoy and his gang would torment her with once they found out. She gave his hand a soft squeeze. Another question manifested in his mind, and he hesitated a bit before asking it.

"So does this mean that we're...?"

Angelina stopped walking and turned to face him, her hand still in his. They were standing under a familiar-looking tree. Harry remembered sitting under this tree by himself last year, fuming over his period of not talking to Ron before the first task of the tournament. They were partially hidden in shade from the others. She stared at him for an awfully long time, and he thought perhaps he had asked too many questions; pushed the matter a little too far. But then she reached up with her other hand and took hold of his collar, forcing him to step closer to her. She was taller than him, but only just, and looking into her eyes he found no traces of annoyance or hesitation on her part.

She kissed him. This one was different from the others only because he truly felt that he had a right to kiss her; that she was sort of reserving that right for him. It was the answer to his question. Angelina, with the simple gesture of capturing his lips with hers and allowing him to assert himself in any way he pleased, had told him that she wanted to be his girlfriend. The full question needn't have escaped him. Harry chose to cup her face with his hands, almost smiling against her lips at how warm and soft her skin was. He felt a

flurry of excitement stir in him when she gripped his shirt collar tighter after he did this.

When they released each other they smiled like idiots for a moment before she suggested that they join the others.

“Hey,” Ron nudged Hermione in the arm and nodded in the direction that Harry and Angelina were approaching them from, hand in hand. “Would you look at that?”

“What?” Hermione pretended that she saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Ron glanced at Ginny but shrugged, turning to pull up a handful thick grass from the ground. Harry and Angelina stopped walking when they reached the other three, still holding hands. Harry wore a happy but acutely aware expression on his face. Angelina simply reached up to shield her eyes from the sun, squinting out across the lake.

“I think this’ll be the last sunny day we have for a while, mates,” she said to them. “Pity. Gloom is following me everywhere.”

“Not everywhere...” Harry couldn’t help saying. He rubbed his thumb over hers, ignoring Ron’s gape and Hermione’s pleased-as-punch expression. Ginny seemed not to really notice; she was crouched at the bank of the water, swishing a twig around in her reflection.

“So, Harry,” Hermione spoke, adopting a serious attitude. “I was thinking about some things we could do about making sure we don’t get caught.”

“Oh yeah?” Harry released Angelina’s hand long enough to sit down. They all followed suit. Angelina sat with her elbow on Harry’s knee, and Ginny came up from the edge of the water and sat with them, smiling as Hermione started to explain some of things she’d come up with. They all listened, and Harry was especially impressed at her idea for handing out fake Galleons to everybody that were magicked so that they were all connected. They sat and talked for a long time; until the sun was slowly slipping down behind the net of trees that made up the Forbidden Forest.

Angelina shivered slightly and sat up straight, checking her watch.
“Wow, it’s almost time for dinner.”

They all looked at each other excitedly. None of them were particularly famished, but they were all on pins and needles waiting for the first meeting of their secret defense class. And Harry was going to teach it. Suddenly that knowledge made him extremely uneasy. They began their walk back up to the castle and the sun went down when they were about half-way across the grounds. The only real light was coming from the warm glow through the many windows ahead of them. Angelina leaned in and gave Harry’s arm a squeeze.

“Nervous?” He nodded, not looking at her. “Don’t be.”

“Yeah, don’t worry mate,” Ron chimed in, turning from his position ahead of them to offer Harry a reassuring smile. “Fred and George said they’d rather learn Defense Against the Dark Arts from you than anybody.”

“Right,” Ginny added. “And if you’ve made those two actually want to learn something, you’re doing great already!”

Harry spared a hoarse laugh.

What they said felt great, but in truth it was actually Angelina’s presence at his side that made him feel more confident. Ron and Ginny went on verbally abusing the twins as they entered, and Harry chuckled along with Angelina and Hermione.

Just before they entered the Great Hall, the two of them exchanged glances that told each other they weren’t quite ready to show themselves off in front of the whole school. They had only just agreed that they were dating, after all. Harry knew that Angelina really liked him, but he didn’t think either of them needed to hear Malfoy’s mouth just then.

“Maybe after you win the match?” he whispered, leaning very close to her as they slowed their steps. She returned his warm smile, but rolled her eyes at the prospect of winning without her best players.

Their fingers began to slip apart as he promised: "I'll give you a victory kiss."

"Okay..."

Reluctantly they pulled away from each other and went to join their respective groups of friends at the Gryffindor table.

Ron didn't even wait for Harry to sit down properly before he started in on his messy-haired friend. "Blimey, Harry, you work fast!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry frowned at Ron's mischievous grin and reached for the pumpkin juice.

"Oh, nothing...just that yesterday you had her up in our room and today you're holding hands all cozy-like. She must really like ya, that's all. Wish she fancied me enough to stop yelling at me so much. She's like my mum sometimes..."

Hermione shook her head at Ron with a mixture of irritation and sympathy.

"I'll thank you not to say stuff like that too loudly, Ron," Harry said, glancing warily around them. "We haven't exactly told anyone besides you guys."

"That's smart," Ginny said unexpectedly. She bit hungrily into a turkey leg and eyed him thoughtfully while she chewed. He raised an eyebrow at her, waiting until she swallowed. "Malfoy is just itching to find something else to harp about to Umbridge, I'll bet."

"Yeah, but do you think it matters?" he asked. "I've been banned from playing...technically Angelina isn't my captain anymore. Umbridge can't possibly do anything to her for dating me." Harry felt a little strange using the words "Angelina", "dating" and "me" in the same sentence. On top of that, talking to Ginny about it didn't seem quite right. He couldn't decide if it was because for so long she had just been Ron's little sister to him and now he counted her as one of his good friends, or if it were the fact that she used to have a crush on him. Either way, what she had said bothered him.

"That's true...but I wouldn't put it past old toad-face to find a loophole and suspend Angelina just like she did you and my brothers."

"That's complete rubbish!" Ron fumed through a mouthful of cranberry sauce and turkey breast. "Is nothing sacred to that woman?"

Harry didn't say anything. He stared at his plate, thinking hard. He was relieved that he and Angelina had decided not to enter the Great Hall holding hands. Something suddenly occurred to him and he looked up at the staff table.

Professor Dumbledore was sitting in his usual seat in the center of the table, having a quiet conversation with Professor McGonagall. As if fully aware that Harry was looking at him, the Headmaster turned from Minerva long enough to give the boy a slight nod and a kind smile, his eyes twinkling as ever beneath his half-moon spectacles. It was odd—Dumbledore was absent a lot lately, but whenever he came back it was always as if he'd never left. Did he remember keeping Harry out of the loop that whole summer? His eyes twinkling...it seemed as though he did not. The old man was odd indeed. Harry made up his mind to find the time to go and pay him a visit soon. He figured it was about time to get some answers, starting with the possible meanings behind those dreams he'd been having. Licking his lips hungrily, Harry dove into his dinner.

Chapter Twelve: Their Roles Reversed

When dinner was over, and with an hour to go till the meeting, Harry was hurrying back up to the Gryffindor Tower so he could fetch his Marauder's Map when he ran into Zacharius Smith.

At first he simply stared at the other boy, trying to decide whether or not to tell him to shove off and get out of his way, but when Zach spoke, his expression was one of repentance.

"I just wanted you to know that I had nothing to do with Malfoy's antics at the practice drill," he began. Harry squinted at him suspiciously, deciding to see where this went, though he had a pretty good idea. "I didn't know he was trying to get you kicked off the team, and I didn't put that Silencer on Granger. I swear it." Zach looked as if the very act of apologizing caused him physical pain, but he kept at it, telling Harry that he was sorry for what happened and that he still wanted to be a part of the secret defense group. "That Cho girl told me you guys were meeting tonight. I can come...can't I?"

Harry felt a pang of annoyance at Cho but then reasoned that she didn't know any better—she probably didn't have all the details about what happened at the practice. "Er—sure..." he said quietly, despite his still-lingering feelings of resentment towards the Hufflepuff. "It's in an hour. Find Cho and she'll take you to where it'll be held."

Harry turned and walked past Zach, ignoring the boy's muttered "Thanks..."

At half-past seven Harry, Ron, and Hermione left the common room and made their way up to the seventh floor. Harry kept checking the map for signs of teachers but all looked safe: Dumbledore was in his office, Umbridge in hers, and Filch was four floors below them with Mrs. Norris at his side. They found the bit of hall where the image of Barnabas and the trolls presided. Ron made a face at the sight of the poor foolish wizard being clubbed relentlessly by three monstrous things in tutus. "Poor old git," he muttered. "He had that one coming."

Harry stopped them just where he had stood the year before watching Angelina and the twins make fools of themselves. He took a deep breath and tucked his map back into the folds of his robes.

"Okay...Sirius said to walk past this wall three times..."

They set to pacing, the three of them concentrating hard on what they needed. Harry focused his mind singularly on having a place to practice defensive magic; a place no one could find; a place big enough for all of them...

"Harry!" Hermione drew in her breath sharply and grabbed his arm, pointing with her other hand at the door that had just appeared out of nowhere. "Is that...?"

Harry grinned and stepped forward, reaching out to grasp the handle of the door. He pulled it open and the three of them hurried inside. Needless to say, the first thing Hermione spotted when they emerged into the large, fully-stocked room was the shelves full of books. She went straight for them, making delighted noises as she skimmed through the titles of all the books, almost every one of them dedicated to the practice of Defensive Magic. There were a few, Hermione noted to them aloud, that concerned Dark Magic as well, but she sternly observed that perhaps they shouldn't tamper with those. Ron and Harry looked around at the place while Hermione settled down with a copy of *Jinxes for the Jinxed*. Harry was quite pleased with all the stuff. There was an assortment of Dark Detectors and a familiar-looking Foe-Glass, and lots of soft cushions that Ron noted would be perfect for practicing Stunning spells. The simple magic of a table, four chairs, and some shot glasses paled in comparison to the form the room had taken on for them tonight.

Soon people started arriving. Ginny, Lavender, Dean, Neville, and Michael Corner arrived first, followed shortly after that by Angelina and the twins. Harry and Angelina said hello to each other very quietly and a little too affectionately, Fred observed, much to Harry's embarrassment. Luckily Fred took mind of the other people in the room and only noted this where the three of them could hear, giving Harry a wink as a proud father would his romancing son.

Cho Chang, her friend Marietta, and Zach Smith arrived before Harry could retort to Fred's jibe, causing Ron to sit up straight and stare at them as they emerged. "What's he doing in here?" the youngest Weasley boy said sharply.

"It's okay, he explained himself," Harry offered a bit lamely, truly not knowing exactly why he had allowed Zach to join them, besides the obvious fact that it didn't really matter if he was there or not: he still knew about their club, and that was enough to go snitching to anyone he pleased. Harry was thankful Hermione was so clever; the jinxed parchment they'd all signed had been a brilliant idea and it made him feel better about the whole thing. Ron narrowed his eyes at Zach but said nothing.

The lot of them were settled in and awaiting a word from Harry by five-past eight.

Harry looked around at them all. Angelina and the twins were sitting together, she in the middle. They looked like a funny reverse version of the Muggle biscuits Harry's cousin Dudley gobbled up all the time. Cho and Marietta stared up at him; his heart beat at him through his now too-tight shirt and jumper when he saw the excited expression on his former crush's pretty face. Ginny sat leaned against Michael, her expression hard to read but he hoped she was praying for him not to embarrass himself in front of all of them.

"Uh, well, now we're all here, I just wanted to--" he noticed that Hermione had raised her hand. Frowning, Harry nodded for her to speak. "What, Hermione?"

"I think, before everything gets started officially," she began ceremoniously, "It might be a good idea to elect a leader."

"Harry's the leader." Harry looked to Cho, who had spoken to Hermione as if she were daft. He felt a pang of defensiveness for Hermione's benefit, but competing with that were two other emotions: a slight swell of delight that Cho automatically thought of him as her leader, and some discomfort at being singled out as such.

Hermione paid little mind to Cho's affronted attitude. She explained that it would be better if they all voted and gave him the authority themselves, rather than the rank simply being an assumed thing. He thought that she was perhaps doing this for his own peace of mind, more than theirs...she knew he was nervous and a little self-conscious about being any sort of leader to a bunch of kids (many of whom were older than him) who all had their own opinions on who he was and what he had done.

Harry watched as they all voted, officially electing him leader of their group. Once that was out of the way, they settled on a name. Angelina suggested "The Anti-Umbridge League" somewhat bitterly. Though they all felt the same about the woman, they chose to go a different direction. It was Ginny who came up with "Dumbledore's Army."

They took a vote, and Dumbledore's Army (the D.A. for short) finally began their meeting.

"Okay..." Harry exhaled his nerves, unconsciously wiping his hands on his jeans. He had taken his cloak off and rolled up his sleeves. It had become a slightly warmer temperature now that he was being watched by twenty-something pairs of eyes. "Well, I thought we ought to start with something basic, but really useful. It's only meant to disarm your opponent, but it's come in handy--"

"Expelliarmus?" Zacharius said rather rebelliously. "How is something that simple supposed to help us against You-Know-Who?"

Harry blinked at him, suddenly regretting his decision to allow him to attend tonight. "It saved my life last year when he tried to kill me."

The room was silent, all of them taking in the gravity of Harry's statement. Zacharius opened his mouth to speak but before he could say anything else, Angelina's firm voice could be heard declaring: "If you think it's beneath you, you can leave, Smith."

"Yeah, the door's that way..." Ron muttered.

Zach said nothing. There were no more objections on what Harry chose for them to learn.

Harry silently bade Angelina thank you with his eyes and continued. “So, eh...let’s pair off. We can practice for a few minutes, and then regroup.”

An odd feeling came over him as he watched them all silently obey him. No wonder teachers love their power so much... he thought, smiling a little. It was kind of cool to finally be respected, if only for an hour.

Harry blew his unruly hair out of his face and leaned over to replace another pillow. Their first meeting, for all intents and purposes, had gone really well. As he shoved more pillows back into the places they’d found them earlier, he remembered how excited Neville had been to succeed at disarming him, even though his attention had been elsewhere at the time. Ginny had been very impressive; disarming her boyfriend Michael without much effort once she got the hang of it—and she learned quickly. Angelina impressed him as well, but of course he had to linger with her a bit when he’d been walking around to observe people’s progress. She gave him a sly smile as she pretended that she hadn’t quite gotten the hang of the necessary wrist movement.

“Like this?” she’d asked innocently. He’d almost chuckled aloud, but chose to nod at her, adopting a serious expression.

“Right. No, wait. Here...” He had walked around behind her, ignoring the somewhat envious look that her partner Lee Jordan was giving at all the personal attention. He took hold of her wrist, his throat a little tight with the sheer audacity of what he was doing in the midst of all the others, and mimed the motion with her. “Like that. Try it.” His fingers lingered on her skin some seconds longer than they needed to before he let her go. She performed the charm perfectly, causing Lee’s wand to fly out of his grip.

“Thanks.”

"No problem." His temples had been throbbing with a foreign swell of warmth that Harry would months later learn was as yet untapped energy of a certain kind.

Cho.

Cho was a natural spell-caster, who seemed to learn quickly and produce results consistently...at least she did when Harry wasn't anywhere near her. It was odd...she seemed to mess up more often when he was watching her than she did when he was helping someone else, or when she didn't know that he was looking. She had muttered something about him making her nervous, but Harry just couldn't grasp that concept. Surely the roles hadn't been reversed?

Now, Harry fluffed the last pillow, hoping that his stalling technique had worked and Angelina had caught on that he wanted to walk back to the common room with her after Ron and Hermione made sure everyone had returned safely. He stood upright as casually as he could; feeling a little ridiculous for fluffing all those cushions; and scratched his neck before turning to check that it was just the two of them. It was. But instead of Angelina, he found himself looking a Cho.

Harry blinked at her, trying to hide the surprise in his eyes. "Cho? Why didn't you go with Ron and Hermione?"

"Oh, um..." the pretty girl shifted awkwardly on her feet and looked away from him at the bookshelf over his shoulder. After a pause in which Harry suspected she was coming up with an answer that seemed believable, she said simply: "I forgot something."

"Oh. Okay. What?"

"Eh...I-I mean I lost it."

Harry was puzzled, but he didn't verbalize the feeling. He looked around at his feet, not really sure what exactly he was looking for. An earring? Cho didn't wear earrings. He knew little things like that about her. He had watched her from a distance all last year. She wasn't making any attempt to search with him, and when he realized this he frowned at her. "Um...Cho? What exactly--?"

"Harry, I didn't really lose anything," she blurted.

"Oh." He really must learn to articulate himself better. Harry waited for her to explain herself, all the while thinking vaguely that he had only wanted to sneak in a kiss or two with Angelina and damned if something like this happened. She seemed unwilling to elaborate—seemed down right harassed by her own reluctance. Harry suddenly remembered Zach's terrible apology to him after dinner and he smiled. "Hey, if this is about Zach...its fine, don't worry about it." Harry gestured to nothing in particular with his hands. "I mean, he is a bit of a prat, but I suppose he's all right."

"Zach? Oh, yeah...I don't really like him that much but I think he and Marietta have a...thing."

"Ahh, I see." Harry was beginning to relax, grateful for some semblance of a casual conversation. He marveled at the fact that if this had been last year, he would not have been able to speak much due to a crippling case of nerves. "They look like they would. No offense to your friend."

Cho looked for a moment as if she didn't understand his statement, but then she sighed and stepped forward slightly, closing off some space between them. He saw her raven-colored hair glint almost bluish in the dim light. "Harry, you know, I really wanted to tell you something."

"What?" His voice cracked.

Her eyes were heavily-lidded; the lashes very delicately blinking up at him. Harry remembered why he liked her. She was quite beautiful but there was sadness to her beauty that she had always possessed. Only now, after what happened to Cedric, it seemed a little more palpable. He always thought that she was like him; sort of cut off from everyone. Sort of...different.

"Last year, when you asked me to the ball, I really would've said yes, except..." she trailed off.

"I know. Cedric asked you first." It was a little hard for him to talk about Cedric aloud, especially to her. He rubbed his chest as a slight stiffness came upon him there. "It-It's okay."

"I really liked you."

Harry felt his stomach do a back flip. He had to think for a minute. She said she liked him. Out loud. But, she had used the past tense. "I-I really liked you too..." was all he could think to say.

She looked relieved and upset at the same time. "Oh, why couldn't you have asked me sooner?"

"Well, it was a little hard to get up the nerve," again, he found she made him unusually honest about his feelings. "I don't think any of us knew what we were doing." He tried to make a joke of it, including the whole of the male population at Hogwarts in his statement.

There was a moment of heavy silence. Cho curled and uncurled her fingers together. Harry shoved his hands in his pockets and wondered what to say next. He thought of Angelina and was sure he felt a pang of guilt seize him but it was gone as quickly as it had come and he assured himself that he and Cho were just talking. Though, truth be told, it was the most words the two of them had ever exchanged. He found this amusing.

"What are you smiling about?" came her soft, small voice.

"Huh? Nothing..."

"You did a good job tonight. You're a natural teacher."

"Oh, thanks." She seemed to have moved closer to him. Or maybe he was imagining it.

"Did you see how everyone just...did what you said?"

"Yeah, that was pretty cool..." he cleared his throat and shifted on his feet, "...yeah."

"Harry?" Harry swallowed back an uncomfortable knot in his throat. She was definitely closer.

"Yes?" Now he could smell the potion she used in her hair. Ever-last lilac scent. All sorts of emotions ran through Harry just then, starting with an absurd yank of excitement that really should've belonged to the past, and ending with that little pang of guilt again.

"I like the way you roll your sleeves up..." She was mere inches from him, now. Despite her rather strange statement, he found himself blushing.

"Uh...thanks."

"Your arms are so..." she reached up and touched cool fingers to his burning skin. The hairs on his arm stood up. Her hands were very delicate. "Strong. Like his were..."

She had closed her eyes and was definitely leaning in to kiss him. He probably would have done the same, but something she said registered a little slowly and when it clicked he frowned and stepped back. Her eyes flew open and she looked confused, but he could see that she realized her mistake.

"You mean...like Cedric's?"

"What?"

"Maybe we should get back. Curfew is over. We'll be in loads of trouble if we're caught."

Harry didn't look at her directly as he turned to walk past her and gather up his cloak and map. He knew that the irritation and disappointment could be read clearly on his face, but he didn't care. He didn't really even know why he was so angry—she was not his girlfriend and he shouldn't have allowed himself to be put in the situation. All the same, a small part of him (all right, a bigger part than he was willing to admit) felt really let down. Cho stood there for a moment, looking at him hopefully as if she wanted him to forget what

she said and come back to the moment. He still didn't look at her as he fastened his robe and tucked his map into his back pocket.

"I think the coast is clear for now, but we have to hurry."

"Okay..." Somewhat reluctantly, Cho followed him out of the room. They walked in silence, Harry checking his map every now and again to make sure no one was about. They barely escaped being spotted by Mrs. Norris, but other than that there was no danger. When they were standing outside the entrance to her common room, she tried to say something; perhaps an apology for ruining their first moment alone together since last year; but he cut her off, saying that he really should hurry back to his side of the castle.

"Don't want another week of detention with Umbridge," he muttered, waving slightly and turning to go. "Good night, Cho."

"Night, Harry..." He left her staring glumly after him. Harry chided himself silently all the way back to the Gryffindor common room. How could he have been so incredibly sappy and stupid? Fist off, getting caught up in a moment with Cho that he really had no right to be involved in since he already had a girlfriend. And second off, getting so upset over a perfectly innocent comment? After all, he had no idea how hard it had been for Cho after Cedric...left. Harry knew how long it took him to shed the terrible images of the older Hufflepuff's lifeless eyes...he could only imagine how poor Cho must've felt over it.

He decided not to let it matter so much. It was nice to know that she had the same feelings for him as he'd had for her. But the fact was he had to remember that his crush on Cho was all past, now. Too little, too late. Angelina was his girlfriend, and he could not be happier with the way things had turned out. As if he had conjured her up by thinking so fondly of their moments together, Harry found Angelina sitting on the chaise lounge in the common room when he stepped through. He grinned, truly glad that she had waited up for him.

"Hey," he said in a good-natured whisper, not noticing the somewhat sour look on her pretty face. The room was dark, as everyone had

already gone up to bed, and the only light was the amber flicker of the fire. "I'm glad you're up. Wanted to say g'night..."

"Did you have fun snogging Cho Chang, then?"

Harry stopped mid-lean—he had been planning to kiss her, but her cold voice destroyed that idea. He furrowed his brow.

"What?"

Angelina stood up and slipped past him, walking around to the other side of the chaise. She glared at him.

"I saw her waiting up for you. It took you an awfully long time to get back, Harry..."

"Hang on a sec--" he said defensively, but she threw up a hand to silence him.

"I know you have a crush on her. And I told you she felt the same, remember?"

"Yeah, you did. And she...well, she does...sort of." She scoffed at him as if he had admitted guilt, causing him to shake his head anxiously. "That doesn't mean anything happened! We just talked for a bit, honest!"

Harry hadn't thought that this would happen. The possibility of actually fighting with Angelina so soon after they'd agreed to be together had been almost nonexistent in his mind before this moment, and he had to admit he was rather thrown for a loop. She stood staring at him, her arms crossed, seemingly waiting for him to explain himself. He suddenly realized that he had no idea what he was doing. Beginning to witness the impossible myriad of girls' emotions was a bit of a shock. He tried to place himself in her shoes. What if the roles were reversed and it had been Angelina lingering behind to talk to Fred? He had always thought the two of them were very, very close. This knowledge was one of the things that had confused him when they first began to like each other—he had simply assumed, like

everyone else did, probably, that Fred and Angelina were a couple. If not already, then they were certainly on their way to being one. But, no...Fred had been sitting right there in the little room when Angelina kissed him. So, what if Fred and Angie had stayed behind and been alone for half an hour? What if he had been the one waiting up for her, his mind racing through what in the world those two could've been doing all that while?

Harry thought he understood, now. Angelina was jealous; just like he would've been if things were the other way around.

"Well?" she said impatiently, drawing him out of his contemplation. She looked angry, but also kind of scared. What did she expect him to say to her? That he had decided that he liked Cho and he wanted her to be his girlfriend instead? It looked to Harry like maybe she did expect him to say that. He thought was just plain silly of her. He wasn't that kind of guy.

Harry decided to be honest...sort of. "We talked about Cedric, actually."

When she heard these words, her face slowly melted from angry impatience to sympathy and a little embarrassment. "Oh..." was all she said. Harry watched her rub her forehead with her palms, sighing as if she were suddenly very tired. This gesture really revealed her age to him, he felt. It was funny—he had never really thought of himself like this before—but indeed sometimes she made him feel, with something as simple as a gesture, that he was not fit for her. Was he really so young and inexperienced? Would he become an annoyance to her down the line, when what he wanted to be was...he wanted to be her equal; her boyfriend.

Angelina lowered her hands and smiled apologetically at him. "I'm sorry, Harry. It's all the stress from Quidditch. I'm just...arse over tits about everything, it seems, including you. I was being a paranoid sod, forget about it."

He didn't know what to say to that. "It's my fault," he opted to utter.

She shook her head sternly. "I would have done the same thing you did, so shut up about that."

She was speaking to him that way again—it always drove him crazy but now he realized he kind of liked it in some strange way. He didn't know, of course, that this would play a role in the dynamic they shared for a long time to come.

"But you have to know that I feel worse than anybody about it, right?"

"I know. Doesn't change anything, though."

"No. It doesn't."

"So..." Angelina raised a curious eyebrow at him. "Nothing...happened? You guys just...talked about, um..." she hesitated in mentioning Cedric's name.

"Well, she did mostly," Harry sat down and rested his head on the comfortable pillows of the couch. Angelina joined him. "I don't really like talking about him." He didn't explain why, but he knew he didn't need to.

"Sorry I accused you."

"I'd have done the same, actually." He smiled and closed his eyes, suddenly feeling as tired as she had looked moments before. "I still don't understand why you like me."

"You do that all the time," she said almost reproachfully. So do you, he thought, in reference to her way of speaking to him as if he were a first year who had wandered into the wrong lavatory. "Why do you not see what everyone else does? Cho included."

"She told me I was a good teacher." He ignored her first statement, not really wishing to talk to her about his insecurities so early in their relationship: officially four hours, thirty-two minutes, and counting, as a couple.

"You are," she agreed. "Can't wait till our next lesson, Harry..." Her voice took on a mischievous tone that made him slide open his eyes and turn to look at her. Her eyes were sparkling in the amber flicker of the fire. Her mouth looked...he leaned over and kissed her.

"That's Mister Potter to you." Harry whispered hoarsely, smiling against her full lips and putting to use his newly-liberated tongue as he slid it warmly into her mouth and met it with hers.

He couldn't suppress that smirk; he had often wondered what he would sound like saying stuff like that to a girl. Indeed it seemed to excite her and he found himself being pushed down to lie on his back on the couch. The soft cushion of the red velvet pillows sank below him to accommodate their weight as she fell on top of him, taking control of the kiss. Her long limbs seemed to wrap themselves protectively around him and she deepened their embrace, falling slowly into his mouth with her own. Harry closed his eyes and reveled in the feel of her supple body undulating against his. He allowed her to lead him, feeling her bring her leg up slightly so that her knee rested just at his waist. He hesitated, but let his hand slide across her bare skin there. She was wearing shorts and a simple tee-shirt of one her favorite Quidditch teams to sleep in; no bra, he could tell after a moment. Her fingers were in his hair. She opened her mouth wider and her lips took his chin into a warm, damp embrace. Harry felt a heavy sigh of heat swoop through him from navel to crotch and he gasped in surprise.

She pulled herself upward slightly, frowning down at him. "What's wrong?"

He didn't know how to say it. He didn't know how to say that this was the first time he'd ever gone this far with a girl...god and it was a girl like her...

His senses had suddenly become very sensitive and everything he felt—from the smoothness of the skin on her thigh as his hand rested on it, to the soft prickle of the tips of her long hair brushing against his neck from her position over him—caused his nerve endings to quiver with heat-fueled excitement. This sensation was the most intense in his crotch area, to be sure. As she was now; straddling him; if she

kept on moving around like that she would feel what he wanted to say and there would be no need for him to part his lips. She didn't move any more, but sat watching him with those intense brown eyes of hers.

"You want to stop?"

Harry considered this. He didn't want to embarrass himself. Oh there was a very large part of Harry that really wanted to keep going but he didn't think he would be able to control what would happen if they did. He just loved kissing her—kissing would lead to other things, he knew. Things he had virtually no experience in.

He must've taken too long to weigh his options because she sat up and moved away from him, bringing her knees up to her chin so that she could peer over at him curiously.

"Maybe we should stop."

"We don't have to," he said quietly, his senses still heightened and the warm throb in his groin still not going away. "I was just thinking..."

"It's too soon, right?" she finished for him. "We shouldn't be fooling around so much. And besides, I've got Quidditch and you've got Umbridge to worry about, and if someone saw us like this it might get out that we're together, and rumors would spread like wildfire--!"

"Okay, okay!" he cut her off, a bit annoyed with her anxious chattering. The throbbing began to ebb away a little.

She bit her lip apologetically. "Sorry. But you're right. We should stop."

He wanted to tell her that he hadn't actually said they should stop, but reasoned that she had a point. Ginny's words to him at dinner came back, and he sighed, getting up from the couch and running a hand through his untidy hair. She grinned up at him for a while before standing and taking hold of his face with her soft hands.

"You understand, right?"

Harry nodded breathlessly as they exchanged several swift kisses on the mouth. The sensation of her lips pressing on his and then peeling damply away caused the pulse of arousal to rear up again slightly, and as they embraced Angelina muttered "...you're so cute...it's so hard not to..." He tried to hold her tighter; tried to pull her back into his desire for her. He could feel how much she wanted to stay tangled up with him on the couch, but she pulled her lips away and held him at arm's length again, shaking her head. "Let's just wait a bit, okay Harry?"

"Okay..."

"Goodnight."

"Night, Angelina." He watched her go, momentarily reminded again of the night of the Yule Ball—that retreating back...arched dark-chocolate, climbing up those stairs.

When she was gone he turned to the fireplace and stared into it for a long time. His mind carried him away from Angelina and he thought of Sirius. This led him to Umbridge, which led him to his being banned...the shower...his scar...Dumbledore. He needed to talk to Dumbledore. Ron was right. Deciding to let Angelina deal with re-peopling her poor Quidditch team and to put aside his awkward exchange with Cho for the time being, Harry carried himself and his unsatisfied loins off to bed.

Chapter Thirteen: The Mark

Harry tapped his quill against his History of Magic textbook impatiently, hardly taking in anything Professor Bins was saying, as he waited with hedged breath for the clock on the wall to sing the end of the lesson.

Hermione kept throwing him menacing looks, and went so far as to snatch the quill from his hand and throw it on the desktop. He barely registered this, however, and began drumming his fingers instead. She rolled her eyes and cursed under her breath.

"What are you so anxious about, then?" Ron asked drowsily, drawing little goal rings across the corners of his book.

"Nothing..." Harry muttered, though he was thinking that he only had two minutes of Professor Bins' droning left before he could see Angelina.

The day before, she had used her free periods to see to the tryouts, and would be on the pitch every chance she got in her search for new team members. She had even missed dinner last night and breakfast that morning. Harry heard snatches of conversation from players on other teams who had been practicing before she started and stayed to watch. A square-jawed Hufflepuff player joked that the assembly of eager candidates had been the 'sorriest lot of wannabes' he'd ever seen. Malfoy lost no time in making fun of Harry. Every time he passed the jerk and his stupid followers, they whistled and let loose catcalls followed almost always by either "Better tell your girlfriend to break a leg, Pottykins!" or "You Gryffindors don't stand a chance Saturday!" Ron usually got "Hold your breath 'till the match, won't you Weasel? Got a little surprise for you!"

On top of all that, the rumors about him and Angelina seemed to be spreading and getting ridiculous: there were even rumors that he had stolen her from Fred and that the three of them were caught up in a love triangle. Hermione told him irritably at breakfast that she'd had to break up an argument between two second-years that'd been fighting over whether or not it was true. She said they'd been bickering over whether the fight at the practice drill was between Harry and the twins

over Angelina. Harry knew that Umbridge was probably monitoring all of this from a distance; he just didn't know what she would do about it, if she chose to do anything at all.

He avoided Cho, though he couldn't really reason with himself as to why. He didn't think it should've been such a big deal; after all nothing had happened between them. But something almost did...that was reason enough, wasn't it? He didn't like not being sure if he still had the same feelings for her as he did last year. Not when he was coming on with Angelina so well. He found himself daydreaming about the latter often, and was only interrupted with fleeting memories of Cho occasionally, which confused and agitated him. He knew he should be clear about it before going any further; he had to figure out exactly what he felt for Cho to be fair to Angelina. If he had to pretend not to see Cho in the Great Hall at meals until he could then so be it.

He sat impatiently at the desk between Hermione and Ron, knowing that he had figured it out. He wanted Angelina. Cho was a great girl; very sweet, but sweet wasn't what he wanted anymore. He wanted the intense, exciting, all-consuming whatever-it-was that drew him to Angelina Johnson. Whatever it was that made him sit here counting the seconds as they ticked by, wishing he could speed up time...

He had intended to have spoken to Dumbledore by now, but he was finding it rather difficult to get a hold of the headmaster. Harry had twice attempted to visit him, but on the first occasion, during a free period the day before, the stone gargoyle had not moved when he spoke the last password he'd been given: Licorice Snaps. Harry figured that the password had been changed since last he visited the office and decided to try again later. But on his second attempt, after dinner last night, Professor McGonagall had not given him the password, instead telling him that he should be patient. "The Headmaster has some things to attend to just now, Potter," she'd explained to him seriously. He wanted to ask if it was for the Order, but thought better of it, instead focusing on his slight irritation at being denied access to the old wizard twice. "He'll see you in due time. May I be of assistance until then?"

"No, thanks..." he had told her, disappointment showing in his voice despite his efforts to smile politely. "I'd rather talk to him if that's

okay." She had bristled slightly at the statement, but then nodded and said she understood.

So not seeing Angelina, coupled with the taunting of the Slytherin Quidditch punks, left Harry feeling annoyed and harassed most of the time. It didn't help that Ron and Hermione had been bickering since the night before when Ron had 'caught' her writing a letter to Victor Krum. He'd been outraged, though unable to tell her exactly what he found so insulting about her writing to the Bulgarian Seeker. Hermione had called him a tetchy lump of freckles, and he'd shot right back that she was a control freak and a traitor. Even though Harry had broken up the row, they had remained on the edge of it all morning. Harry thought to himself as they made their way to History of Magic earlier that if one of them snapped at the other again he would hex them both.

"Bottom of the eleventh hour, students! Off to study with you!" The clock sang finally.

"Right, that will be all. Dismissed." Bins drawled hollowly from his position floating above his desk. Harry mentally gave a "woohoo!" of joy as he quickly shoved his book and parchment in his bag and jumped up from the desk, almost knocking Hermione's ink bottle over. She hissed something unladylike at him and took her time gathering her things. He tapped his foot impatiently, glaring at her as he and Ron waited by the door. She slowly closed her bag and stood up, even taking care to push her chair up to the desk before following an already leaving Harry out into the hall.

"Bloody hell, we've got practice tonight..." Ron muttered as they made their way through the throng of students. "And double Potions after break. Today is shaping up to be a poor one, indeed." Harry barely spared his friend attention as he took the stairs two at a time. Ron and Hermione hurried along behind, though they did not see the need to scale the steps like him. Hermione moaned in objection.

"Oh, really, what's your hurry, Harry?"

"Gotta do something," he called back, not trusting that they would understand—he really just needed to see Angelina. Maybe talk about

things. Myabe do other things besides talking..."Mimbulus mimbletonia!" he shouted at the fat lady, who swung forward with an indignant "...little monster, who does he think he is, yelling at me like that...?" He ignored both this and Hermione's breathless apology to her as he emerged into the common room, his eyes searching out the attractive face of the tall, black Quidditch captain.

It was Alicia Spinnet who approached him, and he had to force himself not to frown at her.

"Well, you've been replaced." She sighed and plopped herself onto the couch.

He blinked impassively at her. "With who?"

Ron sat down in a chair opposite Alicia and propped his feet up. "Hopefully someone worse than me so I won't look like such an idiot on Saturday..." he muttered. They all ignored him.

Alicia shrugged at Harry's question, twirling her blonde ponytail around and around with her index finger. "Ginny Weasley."

"What?" Ron and Harry said in unison.

"She's good," again, Alicia shrugged. "Seems to really know her stuff. Mind you, she's not as good as you were, Harry, but we've got no other options at the moment."

Harry clenched his jaw at her harsh tone, but chose to continue as if he hadn't picked it up. "And what about the Beaters? Who's going to replace Fred and George?"

"Andrew Kirk and Jack Sloper. They're all right."

"Who?" Alicia did not repeat herself. He had never even met those two. It puzzled him that there were kids in his own house that he had never even heard of. He fancied he knew at least half everyone by their faces, if not their names. But he immediately put it aside; he didn't want to be talking to Alicia. He wanted to be talking to--"Where's Angelina?"

"Upstairs, I think. Probably taking a nap. I'm knackered as well. Me and Katie have been helping her with tryouts and it was bloody grueling work."

"Damn..." he mumbled, rather disappointed.

Hermione had disappeared already, probably off to study, so he couldn't ask her to let Angelina know he was looking for her. Alicia was dozing off on the couch. Ron seemed off in his own world, his eyes fixed on his shoes. He had a look on his face that suggested he was turning over some unpleasant thoughts. Harry knew he was either pining over Hermione and Victor or imagining that he would make a fool of himself in front of the whole school at the Gryffindor/Slytherin match. Or both.

Sighing heavily, Harry carried himself towards the stairs leading to the boys' dorms and prepared to spend his break period sitting alone in his room.

"Hey." His head flew up and he saw Angelina coming down the stairs, having showered and changed out of her Quidditch gear. He beamed at her and she returned the smile, albeit with a hint of weariness. "What are you up to?"

"Free period. I was going to go and study. You?" He couldn't help the tone of pleasant surprise in his voice. She looked very nice, even though she had only changed back into her school things. He took special notice of how her jumper swelled in a certain area... Harry blushed and drew his eyes back upward to her face.

"Me, too." Angelina walked across to him, her smile slowly spreading. "If I'm smart I'll use the time to study like you. I begged off McGonagall's class this morning to finish the tryouts, but what I really feel like doing is nothing at all."

"Right." He wanted to ask her something...could he? His eyes quickly scanned the common room to make sure no one was paying attention to them. Everyone seemed to be engrossed in their own

various activities...should he? "Um...d'you want to...join me? We could, you know, study together? Or not."

She looked into his eyes and nodded silently, much to his relief.
"Does that tickle?"

Harry lifted his fingers from her collarbone slightly as he looked into her deep, shining brown eyes, his mouth slanting into a curious smile. She shook her head, never breaking their gaze. He didn't either as his fingertips once again resumed their exploration of her neck. They sloped down with her collarbone and glided softly along the thin chain of the simple silver necklace she always wore. "How'd you get so...soft?" he muttered to himself, his eyes lowering from hers to observe the smoothness of her dark chocolate skin. He also quite enjoyed the contrast of their two tones against each other: his pale fingers resting against the mahogany incline of her neck was a pleasing sight to his eyes.

Angelina chuckled quietly. "Why do boys ask such silly questions?"

"Sorry." He reluctantly drew his hand away, but she took hold of it before he could get far and turned it over to look at the white scar on the back; the jagged forms of the letters scrawled across his skin harshly informed her that he would not tell lies.

"Answer my question and I'll answer yours."

"It wasn't really a question. I was just--"

"Why does your scar hurt?"

"It doesn't hurt anymore. It's healed."

"I'm not talking about this one."

Harry stared at his hand in hers as he pondered whether or not to answer this question. Everything was quiet now...the breathless activity from before had now been drained out of them as they lay there together.

They had come up to his room, and to Harry's satisfaction found that none of his other roommates were there. It had been her idea to lock the door. He didn't protest. He knew they both had no intention of studying. He would worry about any locked out and irritated roommates later.

He hardly breathed as he watched her approach him from the door, her eyes dark and intense as they had been Sunday night when he returned from escorting Cho to her common room. He had muttered something along the lines of "...I thought you said we shouldn't...?" but she had merely tossed her head dismissively and seized him, falling with him onto Seamus' bed, which was closest to them.

This session of comfort was far better and far more intense than the others, especially where his previously unsatisfied nether region was concerned.

Though Harry had always observed that Angelina was beautiful and headstrong and fearless from four years of watching her kick arse on the Quidditch team and hold her own against the likes of Fred and George—he had never thought he would get to experience this side of her. She was magnificent.

At first, she led the way; her movements were paced and purposeful. His heart throbbed beneath his jumper before she removed it and his school tie. She unbuttoned his collar just enough to expose his neck and he found himself allowing her to sink her teeth gently into his skin. Then followed a pulling sensation that sent the quivering warmth through him again. She did this for a little while; Harry had actually closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on the odd but pleasant feeling before she let him go to smile at him.

"Did you like that?"

"Yeah." Harry breathed. "Where'd you pick that up?"

"Around..." she answered mischievously. He wanted to ask from whom, but didn't receive the chance; she was kissing him again before he could blink. Kissing was always his favorite. Angelina's lips

were full and warm and they gave him the most wonderful flutter in his stomach. The quivering turned to full on waves of heat that rolled through him endlessly yet rhythmically as he folded his arms around her. Her body was lean and soft against his. Her frame as delicate as any fragile thing—he was surprised at this; she was an athlete but had curves like...well, like he imaged Cho might have. Casting Cho to the back of his mind, Harry concentrated on practicing what he was learning. Their tongues met and mingled slowly. He found that deepening the kiss ever so slightly made her stiffen with what he knew was pleasure if he did it every so often. They were sitting up on Seamus' bed; her legs were wrapped around him and she sat in his lap. Their arms were wrapped around each other and the heat between them had no room to escape. Harry moved his kisses from her mouth to her chin, as she had done him the other night. She let out her breath slowly as he lingered there for a second before moving down to her neck. She smelled so good. He couldn't help making a small noise that he hoped she couldn't hear as he breathed in...she smelled like vanilla. He loved vanilla...he bit her on the neck just the way she had him and he felt her legs tighten around his waist. Harry kneaded the soft flesh just under her jaw and ear with his mouth for a long while, enjoying the way she reacted to his attention to what seemed like a particularly sensitive area for her.

He let his arousal come without much complaint this time. It couldn't be a bad thing, he reasoned, if it felt so good.

"What do you want to do next?" she had asked him when they'd stopped for a breather. He could only shake his head, grinning at her like one of those eager first years she'd described to him who had never ridden a broom before.

"I dunno. Tell me what you want."

"Why don't you figure it out, Potter?" she had said in that way. He knew he was beginning to secretly like it when he reached out and pulled her closer to him. "Go on..." She bit her bottom lip with hunger; their noses touched and Harry found himself almost hypnotized by her mouth. "Don't be shy."

It would have irked him in any other circumstance to be called ‘Potter’ and ‘shy’ all in the same breath, but he wanted more to get his mouth on hers than to argue the fact that he was a growing young man who took himself somewhat seriously. He was holding her in a tight embrace when his hand slid down on its own to her bum and she giggled softly. He quickly removed his hand, but she shook her head at him.

“You don’t have to stop.”

Harry didn’t like his cheeks--they turned against his want to be cool about it and proceeded to burn a deep shade of red.

“Do you want me to touch you there?”

Her eyes glinted spectacularly. “Go ahead and see...”

Very slowly he reached down and felt the rise of flesh beyond the small of her back. Their eyes locked and she scooted up a bit in his grip, bringing her even closer to him. It was muscular but supple at the same time and before he could stop himself he squeezed. Angelina sighed deeply and leaned in to kiss him. Wow, he thought to himself as they rocked back and forth slowly, creasing the sheets on Seamus’ bed; their mouths were attached as deeply as their jaws allowed. This is the best study break ever! There was no longer any unsure quivering. What he felt then was hard, intense pressure in his groin and when this happened his throat closed and his head throbbed and he longed to do other things to her. Other things...other things like feel her skin against his skin; see her eyes closed and kiss her in other places besides her mouth and neck...

Angelina sensed his need to keep her pressed against him; she felt him harden in a particular little area she was sitting on and though she wanted very badly to keep going...keep going...his kisses took her breath away...she knew they really shouldn’t. Reluctantly, she broke their kiss off and pulled away from him.

“You okay?” she asked after a moment in which they sat catching their breath again. Harry used the time to try and calm himself—try and get control of the things that were happening to his body all over.

He was tingling. He merely nodded and ran a hand through his hair, the scarlet heat still in his cheeks. "Wow..." Angelina whispered.

Now they lay very close together on the bed, completely oblivious to anything else but each other. Neither of them wondered or cared why they hadn't been disturbed. Angelina held his hand in hers, her thumb gently running back and forth over the scar that Umbridge's enchanted quill had left him.

"It hurts because..." Harry began thickly, trying to think of the best way to describe this to her. "Well it's what he left me. See when he tried to kill me, he couldn't because my mother..." He could just picture it—the flash of green light. And he heard her scream... "It hurts when he's angry. It hurts when he's close. It connects us."

"He?" Angelina turned her head to look at him, but his gaze was focused on their hands. "You mean...You-Know-Who?" He nodded slowly, still not looking at her. "Harry that is awful. I had no idea..."

He felt her squeeze his hand protectively and it allowed him to let forth the rest of it. Lacing his fingers with hers, Harry quietly explained about Voldemort's hold on him; about his dreams, and about how unbearable it had been for the evil wizard to touch him in that cemetery. He told her about Cedric's death...

It had been the first time he had spoken to anyone aloud about it. As he told her about the horrible flash of green light and the heavy thud with which Cedric's lifeless body had hit the ground, she inched closer and took him into a full embrace, burying her face in his neck. He thought he heard her sniff when he finished: "...it was the most scared I've ever been..." A second later there was a damp feeling on his skin. She was crying for him. He knew then that he had been right to tell her—it felt so good to have someone besides Ron and Hermione understand what he was going through. Someone special...someone all his own.

He had left out Sirius and the Order. He didn't think any one of the members would appreciate him divulging this information without asking them, or at least considering the danger in doing so very

carefully. Not that he didn't trust Angelina, but one never knew whose hands information like that could get into if given too freely.

Feeling impossibly relaxed, Harry let his eyes slide closed for a split second that stretched on forever...her warm body against his rose and fell gently with her breath...her vanilla smell lulled him softly...he would have fallen asleep but he suddenly remembered and his eyes flew open.

"Oh no!"

Angelina jumped and sat up with him. "What?"

"I'm late for Potions! Snape is gonna murder me!"

He dashed from the bed and started hastily gathering up his things: shoes, jumper, backpack...

His hair was all over his head when Angelina helped him pull the school jumper roughly down over his torso, but he didn't care. He had no time to be bothered with it. He had to get to the dungeons and fast. He kissed her and hastily muttered: "I'll see you later? If I survive..." when she had unlocked the door for them.

"Harry, wait, you've got--!" He heard her calling to him as he jumped through the portrait hole, but he could not stop. He had seen the clock on the common room wall as he'd been running through and to his horror he was almost half-an-hour late for his most dreaded subject. Snape would show him no mercy.

Harry found himself wildly throwing blame everywhere as he ran: at Ron for not coming to get him when their free period was up, at Angelina for distracting him so much that he forgot about the time (though truthfully he really wasn't angry at that), and even at Hermione for taking so long to gather her things at the end of Professor Bins' class.

"Oh, no you don't, Potter!" Snape hissed, grabbing him by the loose strap of his backpack and yanking him back out through the door when he had tried to slip in unnoticed. Snape had been waiting there for him, he guessed, and now they were standing in the hall just

outside. Snape had left the door open a bit—probably to let that sniggering bastard Malfoy and his friends hear him being raked over the coals. “There is absolutely no excuse for your tardiness!”

Harry stood shaking slightly; he was still breathing hard from the running he had done to get there, just to be screamed at. He should have taken his bloody time for all the difference it had made. In order to stave off his pressing desire to yell back, he clenched his fists and glared at Snap.

“You will receive a zero for today’s lesson and you will have detention with me this Saturday, all day is that clear?”

Harry thought of the Quidditch match but knew that mentioning it would only provoke more yelling. He had really wanted to go and support the team, especially Ron, Ginny, and Angelina, but he could forget about that now.

“Yes sir,” he said quietly through clenched teeth.

Snape’s eyes boiled with loathing as he growled: “Where is that essay I told you to finish on Strengthening Solutions?” Harry reached a shaking hand into his backpack and pulled out his very crumpled essay. He handed it over to the greasy-haired teacher, who snatched it from him with disgust and shook his head menacingly. “This is a pitiful excuse for parchment, Potter,” he continued, snarling at the admittedly poorly treated roll. “I should give you a zero on the assignment just for the state of this thing!”

Then why don’t you? Harry thought crossly.

Snape glared at him for a long time. During the silence Harry could hear Malfoy and his gang guffawing madly at his misfortune. Harry tried to ignore it and looked at Snape head on, waiting. The teacher jabbed a finger past the boy back in the direction he had come.

“Leave my sight at once. Go to Professor McGonagall and explain to her why I have just taken fifty points from Gryffindor!”

Harry turned on his heel and prepared to leave, but suddenly Snape seized him by the collar of his shirt and snatched him back with terrible force. Harry struggled in the hold the older man had on him, grimacing at the proximity, but could do nothing as Snape narrowed his eyes and pulled the collar away from his neck. Harry froze. He had not buttoned it up all the way when he was hastily dressing, and Angelina had said something to him...Oh shite, he thought, alarmed.

"What—is—this?"

"I dunno what you're ta--"

Before he could finish sputtering out a lie, he was being snatched into the classroom and roughly made to stand before his peers. Every pair of eyes turned to stare at them as Snape shouted: "Class! Begin your Forget-Me-Not potions and do it silently! Malfoy, see to it that this dungeon is not burned to the ground while I am gone and do not make me regret leaving you in charge, boy."

"Yes, sir," Draco said, failing to hide the evil grin that had spread across his face. "How long will you be gone, professor?"

Harry saw Ron looking at him empathetically. Hermione only looked as though she were struggling with the side of herself that sympathized with her friend and the side that wanted to lecture him for being so late. This struggle seemed to be won by her stern side when Snape pulled Harry's collar even further away from his neck, revealing to the whole class what Angelina's mouth had left on his skin. His cheeks burned awfully as he heard the scattering of laughter at his expense.

"I don't know...it seems Mister Potter has developed some sort of...rash...and is in need of medical attention." Harry fumed at Snape's side, thinking that the greasy git knew very bloody well that he did not have a skin rash. "See that your assignments are finished before I return or I will be docking points from each of your houses, including Slytherin. Turn around and get to work, Draco."

With that, Snape forced Harry back through the door and dragged him by his collar all the way up to McGonagall's classroom. When

they arrived, Snape rapped smartly on the door and Minerva's stern voice could be heard telling them to come in. Snape stepped inside, momentarily letting go of Harry's collar. "A word, if I might, professor?" he asked.

A few seconds later, all three of them were standing in the hall. McGonagall crossed her arms and gave Harry a shrewdly disapproving look, her eyes pleading with him to just try and explain why he was getting into so much trouble. First repeated detentions with Umbridge, then being banned from her Quidditch team, and now being dragged to interrupt her class by Snape, her mortal enemy as far as Heads of Houses went.

"What have you done this time, Potter?"

"Mister Potter was thirty minutes late to my class this afternoon." Snape said simply. Harry's heart gave a sigh of relief that he had not mentioned the red mark on his neck....yet.

"Why were you so late to Professor Snape's lesson, Harry?"

"Er..." here it came. Harry shifted on his feet, uncomfortably. "Well, it's true, I was late, but I-I didn't mean to be."

"Oh stop your stalling, boy!" Snape growled. "You came traipsing into my classroom thirty minutes late because you were busy getting lock-jaw with your Quidditch captain!" McGonagall gasped, scandalized. Snape's sneer turned into a smirk as he added: "Or your former Quidditch captain, I should say...I guess she doesn't hold you getting yourself banned from the team against you, does she?"

"I'll deal with him from here, Severus." Minerva said sharply. Snape lost his look of satisfaction and glowered, nodding curtly before turning and sweeping away back down the hall. The boy and his Head of House stood in the hall together in silence for an agonizingly long time before she sighed and adjusted her spectacles. Her eyes flickered up and down at him as if she felt sorry for his blundering thick-headedness. "You've received detention from Professor Snape?"

“Saturday...” he mumbled somewhat bitterly.

“I must say, Potter, you are doing a fine job of closing off every single privilege you have at this school. What next? Will you run naked through the halls?”

“I really didn’t mean to be late, Professor!” Harry said a little too childishly.

“Indeed. And is what Professor Snape said true?”

“Er...” Harry shifted on his feet and avoided her gaze. She scoffed at this, probably deducing that in fact, as Snape had accused, Harry had missed half an hour of class because he was making out with Angelina. Even though, in his opinion, it had been worth it, Harry decided to never let that happen again. It was bad enough that the whole Potions class knew why he was late—he was sure the whole school would know by lunchtime if Malfoy had anything to say about it.

“Well I shall have to have a word with Miss Johnson. I expected her, at least, to act responsible, but I see that your fool-headed behavior is rubbing off on her. I am sorely disappointed in you, Potter, you know that? The Quidditch season hasn’t even started yet and look at the mess you and George Weasley made!”

“Sorry, M’am...”

McGonagall sighed and checked her watch. “I must be getting back to my class. I suggest you do the same.”

“I can’t. Professor Snape gave me a zero and dismissed me.”

“Oh for Merlin’s sake!” she snapped, fed up, and shook a finger at him. “Get your act together, Harry! I mean it! Go and find something academic to do for the remainder of the lesson and don’t put another toe out of line, is that clear?”

“Yes, Professor!” Harry turned to flee from her wrath, had a thought, and turned back just as she was opening the door to return to her class. “Um...Professor?”

"What, Potter?"

"D'you think maybe I could go and see Professor Dumbledore now?"

She paused, narrowing her eyes at him thoughtfully. "Perhaps. Fetch him some Pumpkin Pasties, then. And make yourself presentable, will you?"

Without another word she disappeared into the classroom. Harry ran both hands through his wild hair a few times and buttoned his collar all the way; taking care to make sure his jumper was smooth. He looked like Zach Smith. Stuffed up or no, he didn't want Dumbledore seeing his...‘mark’. Deciding to take his time since he still had the whole period, Harry made his way up to Dumbledore's office. He felt kind of cool roaming through the empty halls by himself while everyone else was stuck in class. He wondered as he went if Angelina had gotten into trouble as well.

Chapter Fourteen: A Piece of Advice

Angelina slipped into Professor Banhart's Muggle Studies class while the woman's back was turned and sat down as quietly as she could next to Fred. The redhead Weasley twin cocked an eyebrow at her and mouthed: "Where've you been?" Not wishing to draw any attention to herself, Angelina mouthed back: "None of your business."

Fred's curious gaze turned into an expression of mischief as he suggestively mimed humping the air, much to her distaste. Angelina tried to shake her head disapprovingly, but he winked at her and despite herself she stifled a giggle.

"To the Muggle World, Albert Einstein was what Nicholas Flamel was to us—a very ahead-of-his-time thinker who led the way for mathematical and scientific methods..." Banhart was saying, her back still turned to them as she pointed her wand at the image of a bushy-haired, odd-looking Muggle that was being projected onto the wall behind her desk. "A bit of an oddball in his time, but then again, a genius is hardly ever considered normal, is he?"

Angelina tried to pay attention, but saw no use really. She had already missed over half an hour of the lesson, and her mind kept wandering away from the present as she reminisced about Harry. She couldn't help the smile that spread across her face as she sat, chin in her palm, thinking of his scarlet cheeks and unsure hands. She had to admit it: the boy was something else. Other boys his age usually annoyed her, but this one...his depth and individuality shone through his vivid green eyes as he gazed at her, his intentions well displayed in them. He was no mere fifteen year old. He was a strong, sad, somewhat isolated soul with the ability to make whomever he brought close to him forget about her surroundings completely and focus wholeheartedly on him.

She could hardly believe she had acted so aggressively, but for some reason he brought that out in her. She found herself taking the lead quite easily. The most Angelina had ever done was fool around with Fred—this had occurred once during a summer weekend of their third year when she'd visited the Burrow for the first time and again during a Hogsmeade visit their fifth year. Truth be told, she had never really

taken the time to consider boyfriends; she always thought other things were too important. Quidditch, getting good marks, and becoming an Auror like her grandfather—those were things she fancied should take priority. Being best friends with Fred and George provided just the balance she needed for her stressful school life, and even when she found she needed to be intimate with someone, Fred had been there for her; though both of them profusely swore that they would remain just close friends for as long as they lived. Ah, but things took such a dramatic and unexpected turn, didn't they?

"Tell me what you want..." Harry had whispered to her, his eyes burning. "Do you want me to touch you there?" The hand that then squeezed her possessively did not seem to belong to an ill at ease Harry Potter, age fifteen. Nope. That hand belonged to a guy who knew what he wanted and went for it. It was all she could do not to lose it, and she was grateful she had the presence of mind to put an end to it before it got out of hand. The boy wasn't even sixteen yet and they had only been "dating" for three days.

"Off to lunch with you, young whipper snappers! Hurry along now!"

Angelina was pulled from her thoughts by the singing clock on Professor Banhart's wall and realized that the lesson was over. Avoiding the professor's somewhat puzzled look, she gathered her things and followed Fred out of the classroom, breathing a sigh of relief.

"You're lucky Banhart can hardly see through those glasses of hers, or you'd be in loads of trouble, Angie," Fred quipped, jabbing her good-naturedly in the ribs with his elbow as they walked along. "Too busy having it off with Potter to get to class on time, eh?"

"Shut your trap, Weasley," Angelina said, ruffling his hair. "I was late getting back from the pitch, that's all."

Fred made a face at her obvious lie as he smoothed his hair again, and they burst into laughter. When she had first confided in him that she thought she might like Harry, he had been skeptical and a bit reticent, which was kind of unlike him. "Good lord, why?" he'd asked her in disbelief. "The kid's got a big bull's eye on his forehead with

You-Know-Who's name on it, poor lad. Why would you get yourself mixed up in all that?"

"You're mixed up in 'all that' you git," she'd shot back.

"Exactly. It's no parade. Besides, he's almost two years younger."

"So?"

Fred had thought about his retort for the rest of the day, and then said to her at dinner that night (the same night she found out that Umbridge was going to hold her team on probation): "You're supposed to be a rebel with us. We are the rebels of the whole rebel scene! What's gotten into you, then? What's with all this girly clucking?"

"Bugger off! Speak for yourself. You and George are the rebels, not me." Angelina thought she detected a hint of hurt in her best mate's eyes, but he grinned at her and flicked some mashed potatoes off his spoon onto her plate.

"Just don't stray too far from the gang, and you can have your little school-age love affair, Johnson." He said, stuffing his face with the remaining potatoes all at once. She grimaced at his terrible manners before he added thickly: "But don't come crying to George and me when Harry breaks your heart."

"What? Why would he do that?"

"All heroes break their heroine's heart. Haven't you ever read Muggle comic books?" She stared at him blankly. "Spiderman and Mary Jane?" He had continued listing off meaningless names to her until she had told him to shut up, and they talked no more on the subject for the rest of dinner.

She thought about his reaction for a while, actually. It was true, Angelina never got crushes. Goodness that was odd. She just spent her time with the boys; roughhousing and playing Quidditch and joking around. She supposed it was fitting, them feeling funny about her and Harry. But she had still been annoyed by Fred acting as if

she needed his permission to go out with someone. When he wasn't acting like her evil big brother, he was acting like her father.

Now as they made their way through the halls, she noticed that quite a few people where whispering among themselves and shooting funny looks at her. Trying to ignore it, Angelina turned to Fred and informed him of her decision to replace him with Andrew Kirk. He shrugged and said nothing; she guessed the subject was still kind of sore for him. She didn't blame him. It had been mightily unfair of Umbridge to ban him when he hadn't actually done anything. But she imagined that if George was banned, Fred would have probably quit anyway in support of his brother.

"Look, there's Johnson." Draco Malfoy's obnoxious voice said loudly. Angelina saw him up ahead of her and Fred, surrounded, as usual, by his entourage of Slytherin idiots. Pansy Parkinson's snooty nose was wrinkled with laughter as they approached. "Wonder if she's got it, too?"

Angelina raised an eyebrow irritably at him but chose to ignore his blabbering. Fred looked as if he wanted desperately to pop the kid in his mouth, but Angelina poked him hard to get him to keep walking. Before she could get past Malfoy's two goons Crabbe and Goyle, though, they had blocked her off with their beefy chests puffed out menacingly.

"Oi, outta the way, idiots." Fred ordered.

They ignored him, but stepped aside as Draco came between them to stand before Angelina, a look of both superiority and amusement on his pale face. He reached out and touched her, his finger shifting the collar of her shirt away from her neck slightly, revealing the small mark Harry's mouth had left there. She jerked away from his touch. "Hey get your hands off me, you little eel!"

"Ha. Yeah, she's got it," Malfoy muttered, his eyes flashing at her. "Tsk tsk, Johnson. Spending all your time sucking face with your little Pottykins, eh? Too bad. With that pathetic wet rag of a team you've got, you should be worrying about how you're going to survive the match on Saturday."

His friends all laughed and he stepped away from Angelina as if she carried some sort of contagious disease. Fred did not seem amused. He adopted a sour smile and shook his head at Draco as if he pitied him. “What’s the matter, Malfoy? Jealous because no one would kiss you if your life depended on it? Getting a hickey must be like winning the Quidditch Cup to you.”

Draco’s lip curled up into a snarl as he glared at Fred, but he said nothing. Pansy Parkinson let out a little yip before she realized that it was very bad to laugh at Draco and clamped her mouth shut. They were all quiet until he ordered them to leave him alone. Pansy tried to stay by his side as the rest of them sauntered off, but he turned his nasty gaze on her and she reluctantly left too. The three of them stood regarding each other with the utmost repugnance.

“You’ll regret that,” Draco said quietly, if not a bit too matter-of-factly.

“Keep talking.” Fred uttered, reaching into his pocket for his wand. Angelina watched her friend’s eyes narrow with hatred. She thought perhaps it would be best to end this stand-off and get to the Great Hall before he got himself expelled for sure.

“Get a life, Malfoy,” she told the boy, grabbing Fred’s arm and turning with him to march away.

“Tell Potter to kiss you goodbye, Johnson...”

She almost turned around but decided that it wasn’t worth it. So he thought he could make threats and back them up, eh? Well she’d show him. She’d make sure his team got their arses handed to them at Quidditch Saturday. She had come up with some of the best plays the team had ever used, even in Wood’s day, and she couldn’t wait to practice them tonight. She’d work the Gryffindors hard and tough and when the match came around they would see who was going to regret anything.

Everyone was buzzing like mad when they reached the Great Hall. Many pairs of eyes turned to regard her as she and Fred made their way to their table. George looked very harassed and upset. He

wasted no time when they settled themselves in to tell them that he'd been hearing things about Harry and Angelina.

"I just heard that Harry got a life-threatening skin disease from snogging you!" he hissed indignantly. "Some Slytherin girl asked me if it were true Harry was in the hospital wing on his death bed!"

"That sodding little vomit bag. He works his rotten mouth pretty fast, doesn't he?" Fred shook his head as if he pitied the boy.

"For Merlin's sake, I just gave him a little..." Angelina bit her lip, watching the twins' angry faces melt into expressions of extreme disgust. They didn't want her to give them any details of her goings on with Harry. To them it was like talking about bleeding boils and oozing cold sores—girly romantic stuff was just not their cup of tea. At all. "Bite...on the...never mind."

They rolled their eyes at her and dug irritably into their lunch. Angelina turned to see if Harry was sitting with Ron and Hermione. She didn't see him, but raised an eyebrow at the way his two friends seemed to be eating in silence, barely looking at each other. Maybe he's too embarrassed to eat with all these stupid kids talking about us, she thought sadly. It really sucked that their budding relationship was being marred by a bunch of petty rumors. This was a small glimpse into Harry's world. When people chattered endlessly about him being Slytherin's heir and attacking Muggle-born students, him wetting his pants when faced with a Dementor, him lying about You-Know-Who's return...poor Harry just could not seem to escape the lion's din. And this time Angelina was right in it with him. Or, without him. She frowned at the empty place next to Ron's glowering form. Where was he?

She peered around, searching him out. She spotted him finally, entering the Great Hall. Angelina was mid-smile when she realized that he wasn't walking alone. Walking with him was Ginny Weasley. They were talking quietly to each other and Angelina's smile melted when she saw that they were both completely oblivious to the chattering students around them. Angelina watched, a tiny ball of warmth developing in the pit of her stomach, as the two of them made

their way towards the table. Harry's head was lowered, his thoughtful eyes to the floor, his hands in his pockets. Ginny walked along with him talking, her mouth a little too close to his ear for Angelina's liking. Angelina stiffened and narrowed her eyes. She tried not to let the little ball of heat grow into a bigger ball as she watched Harry chuckle at something Ginny said. They stopped a few feet away from where she was sitting; though she still couldn't hear what they were saying, such was the buzzing of the rest of the students. Now actually frowning, Angelina saw Harry reach out and squeeze Ginny on her shoulder. They exchanged warm smiles and parted ways. She watched him approach her part of the table, his warm smile still lighting up his young face.

"Hey." He said as he stood before her, scratching his neck. "Thought I'd eat lunch with you guys today. That okay?"

Angelina felt the ball of warmth dissipate and she returned his smile. "Sure."

The twins greeted him through full mouths as he sat down next to her. She noticed with delight and relief that he scooted closer than necessary to her on the bench. When she felt him squeeze her knee gently under the table she knew that there had been no reason to be jealous. "So Snape gave me a zero for being late," he said causally, reaching over to fill his plate. "And the whole class saw what you left on my neck..."

The twins groaned at mention of this, but Angelina gave Harry a sympathetic smile. "Sorry about that."

"It's okay. I got to talk to Dumbledore, and I saw Ginny when I was coming back." He paused, looking at her oddly. "She gave me some advice. Made me realize something."

Angelina's frown returned. "What?"

"She just...told me what I needed to hear." Harry smiled again and to her utter shock leaned over to plant a gentle kiss on her mouth right there in front of everybody.

A few gasps of surprise could be heard coming from various places around them but she paid little attention. This kid was growing on her...fast. Trying to pretend that she had been expecting that, Angelina picked up her fork as nonchalantly as she could and took a bite of cottage pie, her eyes scanning the room. She had not taken the time to actually observe the ones who whispered and laughed, but now she realized that most of the girls had expressions of envy on their faces when they looked at her; the boys were mostly giving each other five and nodding at Harry approvingly...it seemed that the buzz was mostly positive, and not as negative as perhaps Malfoy had tried to make it. Pleased with this, Angelina sat up straighter and allowed her shoulder to rub against Harry's, which sent now quite noticeably covetous sighs through a group of Ravenclaw girls behind them.

"And how did it go with Dumbledore?"

Harry stopped cutting from a loaf of banana bread mid-slice and frowned, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "I don't know, really..." was his response, more to himself than to her. She was puzzled, but the thoughtful yet dark expression melted from his face quickly and he shrugged. "So we should have another D.A. meeting before the match," he said, returning to the delicious-smelling loaf.

"Absolutely." Angelina agreed.

"Wicked!" the twins chimed in.

That settled, Harry regaled them with the tale of his embarrassing encounter in Snape's class. Fred and George told him about the rumors that Malfoy was spreading, but he wasn't surprised or even upset. "I figured as much..." was all he said.

"You know, maybe I'm wrong, but--" Angelina gestured down the table at Ron and Hermione, who seemed to be using Ginny to talk to each other, if they opened their mouths in conversation at all. "--it looks like those two have a problem."

Harry frowned at them, and she thought maybe he would abandon his spot next to her to go and see about them. "What else is new?" he said, shaking his head. "I just wish they'd kiss and make up already."

"Ha!" Fred almost choked on his pumpkin juice. "Good one, mate. The day those two admit they have the hots for each other, me and George'll get jobs helping Dad in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office at the Ministry!"

They all shared a quiet but rather hearty laugh at Ron and Hermione's expense and ate their lunch. Angelina felt as if things were finally going to be okay.

"Pumpkin Pasties."

Harry watched with satisfaction as the stone gargoyle guarding Professor Dumbledore's office moved aside for him. He stepped up onto the spiraling stair and raised his head, watching the ceiling above him grow closer as the stair rose to carry him up to the level that the office was located. When he stepped off and approached the door to the Headmaster's quarters, he hesitated before knocking. He hadn't spoken to the old wizard in weeks. He was surprised to find himself a little nervous.

"Come in, please, Harry..." he heard the kind voice utter from inside. Harry was not surprised that the Headmaster had been expecting him. Stepping inside the quiet office, he found Dumbledore standing near Fawkes' perch, feeding the scarlet bird from the palm of his hand.
"How are you?"

Harry nodded slightly to his back. "Fine, sir."

Dumbledore turned around, his eyes twinkling as always, and offered Harry a kind smile. "You're certain? Visiting me during class hours...that deserves an explanation a bit more detailed than 'fine' wouldn't you agree?"

"Um, well..." Harry shifted on his feet and sighed. He might as well have out with it. "Professor Snape dismissed me from class." There was a pause. Dumbledore raised an eyebrow curiously, his smile still

settled across his wise face. He waited for Harry to continue. “Because...well because I was really late getting there. I lost track of time, I guess.”

“I dare ask what it was that kept you so distracted that you forgot to report to the dungeons for your lesson, Harry?”

Harry blinked impassively, really not wanting to say. He figured he’d tell the truth...sort of. “My scar, sir?”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows, his eyes narrowing slightly. “Your scar?”

“It’s been bothering me lately.”

“I see.” The old wizard gave Fawkes a gentle pat on the beak and walked around to settle himself in his chair, motioning for Harry to sit down across from him. “And this is more than the usual, I take it?”

“Well, I’ve also been having some pretty strange dreams,” Harry told him, making himself comfortable.

Dumbledore’s kind smile turned into a serious look of concern and he leaned forward in his chair.

“Tell me about them.”

Harry took a deep breath and began, telling Dumbledore everything he could remember about the dreams he’d been having. He also told him, though a little hesitantly, about the incident in the showers. Dumbledore listened quietly and did not interrupt him, his eyes narrowed in thought. When Harry finished, he scratched his neck nervously and waited for the Headmaster’s response. There was a while of silence. Fawkes trilled softly from his perch and the various gadgets in the office clinked and ticked and whirled. Dumbledore leaned back in his chair again, his hands clasped together.

After another long pause, he narrowed his eyes at Harry, making his face look rather stern. “I shall have to give the matter some thought, Harry...” was all he said.

Harry tilted his head, feeling a little let down by this response. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing, nothing...”

Harry didn’t believe him. The old wizard had the most serious expression on his face, and he seemed to be deep in thought, barely paying attention to the young boy sitting in front of him. Harry didn’t quite understand that the conversation was over until Dumbledore smiled at him. Shoving his hands in his pockets disconsolately, Harry made his way towards the door, not feeling any better now that he had finally gotten to visit.

“Harry.”

He turned around sharply, his eyebrows raised hopefully. “Yes sir?”

“It would be prudent, perhaps, to practice a little...restraint...in the future?” The ebony-haired boy was even more confused now. When Dumbledore’s eyes lowered to his neck, however, the gaze accompanied by a knowing smile, he felt his cheeks go crimson again for the hundredth time that day. “It’s nice to have a special relationship, but I must strongly recommend that you not let it interfere with your school work again.”

“Oh. Yes sir.”

“I believe Madame Pomfrey might still have a little something tucked away for such...injuries of passion. I can see it through the material of your shirt.” And the wizard chuckled at him. Harry didn’t know whether to be offended or amused—he was still fighting off his agitation at not being given a hopeful explanation for his strange dreams. Harry watched Dumbledore stand up again from his desk and walk around toward him. He laid a gentle hand on the boy’s shoulder and walked with him to the door of the office. “Don’t worry, Harry,” he said quietly, in all seriousness now. “We’ll sort it out. I promise.”

“Sure...”

"I know it seems you've gotten no answer from me, but the truth is there may not be an answer...yet."

"Oh."

"Let me think on it. And in the meantime be very careful. I cannot deny that Voldemort has a strange connection to you, and you to him. But just how strong a connection is very unclear." He gave Harry's shoulder a squeeze and ushered him through the door. "Keep your friends—particularly the special ones—close."

Harry supposed that this bit of wisdom would have to suffice, for the time being. He was still a little annoyed that the visit had been so anticlimactic, but he didn't really know what he had expected. Dumbledore was only being Dumbledore, after all. If he said he had to think about it, Harry realized that it was exactly what the man would do. He hoped that he would come up with the answer sooner rather than later.

He found that even though it felt as if he'd only been in the Headmaster's office for a few minutes, the lesson period was almost over. He reasoned that it must have taken him longer than he thought to explain about the dreams and such. He decided to head to the common room and get rid of his school bag before going down to lunch. The halls were filled with students before he left Dumbledore's floor, and he watched them all clustering about, talking amongst themselves about one thing or another.

He was walking down the corridor, heading past some classrooms, when he saw a familiar-looking red head bobbing in the crowd. He grinned and caught up with her, tapping her on the shoulder so she would turn around.

"Oh, hi Harry," Ginny Weasley greeted him casually. She slowed her pace so they could walk together. He noticed for perhaps the first time that she was getting taller, and was pretty much his height now. "Why are you in this part of the castle? Don't you have class in the dungeons this period?"

"Yeah, usually," Harry explained, falling in step with her. "I got kicked out of class for being late."

A very Hermione-like expression flickered across her freckled face for a moment before she smiled and rolled her eyes at him.

"You're always getting into trouble, Harry."

He chuckled a little at her 'rebuke'. "So I hear you're the new Seeker?"

Ginny nodded, frowning a little. He thought her obvious uneasiness over talking to him about it was endearing. "I just found out this morning. Angelina said I was 'surprisingly good'. It's pretty cool." A shadow passed her features. "I just wish Fred and George were still on. It would be great to play with all three of my brothers on the team."

Harry was quiet. She realized that she was talking about being Seeker with Fred and George when that had been his job just a few days ago. She opened her mouth to apologize but he told her it was okay. It was his fault that he couldn't play, not hers.

"I wish I could come see you on Saturday," Harry sighed as they climbed the steps to their floor. "I was given detention, though."

"It's okay. I'm sure I'd be too nervous if you were there."

He looked at her sideways when they climbed through the portrait hole, a little preoccupied by her statement. He thought of Cho. He seemed to have that affect on girls these days...funny. Harry went up to the boys' showers and looked at his neck in the mirror. Angelina had left a round, red mark on his skin that was so pronounced that it did in fact show through the white material of his school shirt. Despite himself Harry smiled at his reflection in the mirror. It was kind of obvious, the mark, but it was also kind of cool if one really thought about it. He had been branded, in a way, as a man with a better half. A really attractive, cool, older half... Still, he thought it best to go and see Madame Pomfrey like Dumbledore suggested.

When he emerged from the showers he found Ginny waiting for him in the common room.

"Oh there you are. You missed Ron and Hermione. I thought I'd wait to see if you were still around."

"Thanks." He shoved his hands in his pockets as they walked.

"That hickey is kind of ghastly..." Ginny said nonchalantly.

Harry made a face at her. "How do you know what it is?"

"I do have a boyfriend, you know. Despite how my brother chooses to ignore it, the fact is that I'm not a little kid anymore."

Harry paused, impressed. "Okay, then. Have you ever gotten one?"

"Nope." A mischievous grin. "But I've given them..."

Harry pretended a little more shock than he actually felt. "Well excuse me." They walked along, Harry's eyes scanning the crowd a little for any signs of Angelina. He noticed that as usual, people were whispering and pointing at him. He tried to ignore it, but soon felt himself becoming flushed with annoyance. Ginny noticed his irritated silence and looked around, too. A Ravenclaw girl giggled and leaned in to whisper something in her friend's ear. Ginny laughed quietly. "I suppose you think all that is funny, don't you?" Harry asked her, his temper rising a little.

"Really, Harry, they're just jealous."

"I wish they would all shut up already..."

Ginny stopped walking and turned to face him. He lifted his foot to continue, but noticing her stern look he lowered it again and stood there with her, trying to quell his annoyance. "You know, I would think you'd be used to it by now. You don't even hear what they're saying, do you? You just automatically assume you're being lied about or criticized."

"That's because I always am!"

"So?"

Harry's eyes widened with incredulity. "So? So it isn't fair! I can't scratch my arse in this school without everyone knowing about it by lunchtime!" He realized that he was shouting, and that his temper had risen seemingly from out of nowhere, but just then all of it came to a head: his frustration with Dumbledore's vagueness, Snape's ruthless taunting of him in front of the whole Potions class, and Malfoy's big mouth...he was finding it hard not to simply take it all out on Ginny. She stood and listened to him, the other students around them giving them curious glances as they passed. The hall was almost empty before she spoke again. He was amazed at the patience in her voice.

"Harry, you're always going to be the center of attention. It's just who you are. It won't always be positive—in fact, most of the time people fear or pull away from what they don't understand, so it should come as no surprise that they are afraid of you because they couldn't possibly imagine what it's like in your shoes..."

He blinked at her, his anger dissipating slightly. She had a point. But he still thought it terribly unfair. What about Voldemort? Had none of them been listening when he told them Voldemort was alive? No...but when Malfoy spread it around that Harry Potter was chatting up the Gryffindor team captain, they jumped at the chance to gossip. What the hell was that all about? It was as if no one in the school had ever had a girlfriend before.

"You're Harry Potter..." Ginny seemed to give voice to what this treatment was called. "The boy who lived, and all that. Everyone, including Draco Malfoy, envies you that. Yes, they'll tease you. Yes they'll talk about you behind your back. But only so your name stays in their mouths because it's the closest they'll ever come to you." He was finding it hard to listen to this; to accept it. She sighed and started walking again. He fell into step with her. "I remember how I felt when I first heard Mum and Dad talk about you..." She said softly. "I thought how tragic your story was, and I felt sorry for you, but I also was simply fascinated with it. You survived the killing curse! You beat You-Know-Who!"

“Ginny...”

“Well, of course I realize now how silly it is to be caught up with that, but Harry you can’t blame people for their ignorance. They just don’t know how horrible it really is!” He realized that she had a reason to be saying this—after all she herself had been possessed by Tom Riddle’s ghost not too long ago. “Besides...” Ginny added as they entered the Great Hall. “Most of the stuff I’ve heard has been nothing but people being impressed that you managed to get a seventh year Quidditch captain as your girlfriend...”

“Really?” He smiled a little at the floor. “So Malfoy hasn’t been telling everyone the only reason I was still on the team was because of that?”

“Well, yes,” she admitted. “But no one believes him apart from really stupid people who haven’t the brains to remember how well you fly. Who cares what they think? You like Angelina, don’t you?”

He grinned sheepishly. “Yeah...she’s really great...”

“You are so obvious!” Ginny teased him. He laughed at himself. “But it’s cute how much you like her. And she likes you a lot, too. She’s been very pleasant to everyone lately, even with the stress of all that Quidditch mess.” Ginny paused for a second. “Listen; you want my advice?” He opened his mouth but she continued without waiting for him. “Just enjoy it. Do you think I care what Ron thinks when he’s harping about me and Michael?”

Harry didn’t answer. She was right. “You know...I think I’ll eat lunch with her and the twins today,” he said thoughtfully, trying to ignore the fact that, in a way, she had sort of said he was cute a second ago. “Let Ron and Hermione know?”

“Okay.”

“Thanks, Ginny...” he reached out and gave her shoulder a squeeze. Ginny’s cheeks grew a darker shade of pink under her freckles and she nodded, turning to go and join Ron and Hermione.

He turned around and found Angelina gazing at him. He felt the strangest sense of calm then. He knew what he had to do—what he ought to have been doing all along. He would handle it the way he had wished everyone else would. If everyone else chose to treat him like a circus act that was their problem. He would act like a normal kid, and enjoy having a girlfriend.

As he kissed Angelina, feeling better, Harry didn't notice two things: First, behind them, Cho Chang was sitting with her friends at the Ravenclaw table watching him with a very disappointed expression on her face. Her friends giggled like idiots and sighed with envy that Angelina was so very lucky to have handsome Harry Potter kissing her...Cho remained silent.

The second was that Draco Malfoy was also watching him and Angelina, but disappointment was hardly the word to describe his expression.

Chapter Fifteen: The Thief

Stomp, stomp, CLAP!

Stomp, stomp, CLAP!

“Weasley is our KING!

Weasley is our KING!

He always lets the Quaffle in,

Weasley is our KING!”

Stomp, stomp, CLAP!

Stomp, stomp, CLAP!

Harry paused in his relentless and tiresome scrubbing to cock an ear to the wind. He could hear...singing? Stomping? The wind picked up, sweeping the sound away a bit, but not even the muffled yet booming voice of Lee Jordan could stifle the many voices that Harry was sure belonged to the entirety of the Slytherin crowd.

Stomp, stomp, CLAP!

“And its Johnson, Johnson with the Quaffle, what a player that girl is!” Jordan was saying. Harry’s scrubbing slowed to a crawl as he strained to hear. “I’ve been saying it for years but she still won’t go out with me, she’d rather shack up with Harry Potter, but that’s okay—sorry, Professor McGonagall, just a fun fact, adds a bit of interest—and she’s ducked Warrington...passes...oh, but she’s hit from behind by a Bludger from Crabbe and it’s Montague that catches the Quaffle...”

Despite feeling embarrassed at being called out by Lee, Harry cursed loudly.

Snape, who had been standing at one of the open passageways facing the pitch in the distance, turned around sharply and glared at

him. Harry quickly sped up again to keep from glaring right back. They were at the top of the tower that housed the Owlery, where the school kept both the owls belonging to the students and a supply of their own for general use. Harry had been scrubbing owl droppings from the hard, crusted surfaces of the space for hours. Snape had given him some weird-tasting potion to keep the contaminants in the droppings from making him sick. It did nothing, however, to help the smell. Even the rather crisp and damp air could not sweep away the sharp smell from making his nostrils twitch and burn. In fact, the dampness of the air made it worse.

He scrubbed at a particularly tough spot on one of the owl perches and pretended to be concentrating hard on removing the white crust.

“Doesn’t seem as if Miss Johnson is fairing too well, Potter...” Snape spoke, his back to the boy as he peered out over the landscape. He shook his head and clicked his tongue when another cheer of triumph from the Slytherin stands was carried to them on the wind. “No indeed not. Pity.”

Harry knew he was smirking. He scrubbed harder and faster out of anger. The evil bastard brought me up here to torture me, he thought venomously. When the hell was the last time anyone cleaned this place? And without magic at that? No, he just wanted me to hear my team losing the match.

“We haven’t lost yet,” Harry found himself saying aloud. Again Snape turned to stare at him contemptuously. “Ginny will probably catch the Snitch before they score again.”

“Ah yes,” Snape sneered. “Clinging to what little shred of hope you have, eh, Potter? Fine. Ignore the fact that your lanky friend has yet to block a goal and his mousy sister is half Draco’s size with even less skill--”

“She’s better than Malfoy wishes he was!” Harry snapped, before he could stop himself.

Snape growled: “Get back to work. Not another word. Root for your hopeless teammates if you will, but do it silently, and scrub!”

Harry stiffly resumed his scouring of owl droppings, but followed Snape's advice and silently prayed that Ginny would catch the Snitch and end the game. He knew that Ron's confidence usually plummeted when he became distracted, and one had to admit that the relentless singing was indeed a distraction. Poor Ron. Harry could only imagine how embarrassed and angry he must've been feeling right then.

Stomp, stomp, CLAP!

--that's funny, Katie Bell and Warrington seem to be doing the same move...but it's Warrington with the Quaffle now, Warrington heading for the goal...he's out of Bludger range with just the Keeper, Ron Weasley ahead..."

"Weasley cannot save a thing,

He cannot block a single ring!

That's why we Slytherins all sing:

Weasley is our KING!"

Harry heard Snape chuckle softly as the white dust of owl muck stuck itself to his glasses and in his hair. He gritted his teeth and scrubbed, listening intently to Lee Jordan's echoing commentary: "So it's the first test for new Gryffindor Keeper, Weasley, brother of banned players Fred and George—GO RON!"

Harry couldn't help himself from looking up into the distance that Snape was watching, his heart beating fast as he squinted for some glimpse of action. He could hardly see anything, of course, save the blurry edge of one of the goal rings and a few tiny dots that he knew were players. Come on, Ron...he prayed, not caring if Snape caught him or not. He gripped the clean end of the owl perch tightly. You can do it. Just concentrate. Block them out and focus!

There was an agonizing pause that to Harry took forever, and then a gigantic rise of cheers and stomps. His hopeful shoulders fell when

he heard Lee announce: “SLYTHERIN SCORES! Went straight through the central goal, despite the Gryffindor Keeper’s efforts—bad luck, Ron...so it’s thirty-nil for Slytherin.”

And like clockwork:

“WEASLEY WAS BORN IN A BIN!

HE ALWAYS LETS THE QUAFFLE IN!

HE’LL MAKE SURE THAT WE WIN!

WEASLEY IS OUT KIIINNNNGGG!”

STOMP, STOMP, CLAP!

Thinking that he would like nothing more than to push Snape, who even with his back turned managed to look smug and self-congratulatory, out of the open space where the owls soared through, Harry reached down to dip his filthy scrubber into the even filthier water and continued with his detention.

This time he tried to block out what was happening. Though he still had hope that Ginny would clench it for them or Angelina would be able to score, he decided that all listening was doing was making him angry. It was distracting him from his work, and he still had so much more to go. He’d be there all night if he kept stalling. It’s only thirty points in, he reasoned. They’ll catch up.

He moved away from Snape, abandoning the perch he was working on, and went to the far wall on the opposite side of the space. The large square opening there faced the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Harry stared out at the net of dark green, one hand moving up and down the wall mechanically, the other hanging lax at his side. He was getting cold; his fingers were numb from being soaked with the cooling water and scrubbing so much. Most of the owls were trying to sleep, though they shifted and flapped their wings in irritation occasionally when he disturbed them by moving around. One or two even dropped fresh buds for him to clean up, hooting as if out of amusement.

He heard another swell of cheers and ignored it, not wishing to guess which side it belonged to.

He thought of Cho. It had been on the steps leading up to the Owlery that he had finally gotten up the nerve to ask her to the Yule Ball. Her sweet face smiling at him regretfully was a far cry from the stony silence she had delivered to him at the D.A. meeting they held Thursday night. It had been a complete transformation. She stayed close to Marietta, not looking at him the whole time they were in pairs, practicing the Impediment Jinx. She flung her wand a little too viciously at him once when he asked her to demonstrate for him and he found himself hitting the opposite wall with so much force that it knocked him out for a few seconds. When he came to, Zacharius Smith looked positively beside himself with amusement and the twins were stifling laughter of their own. "Er...good job..." he had managed to say to her, limping over to observe Neville and Luna Lovegood. Luna blinked at him airily and said: "She's mad at you."

Harry didn't understand at first what he had done to make Cho angry with him, but Hermione told him later that night that she'd overheard Marietta and Cho talking in one of the girls' lavatories.

"I think she didn't really believe the rumors about you and Angelina at first," Hermione had said. "She mentioned seeing the two of you kiss or something. She clammed up when she noticed I was there, mind you, but I'm certain it has something to do with that."

Harry didn't need for Hermione to have heard any more. He realized that Cho had probably been angered by the fact that he had almost let her kiss him, when he was already with Angelina. Well what was he supposed to have done? She basically cornered him in the D.A. room and before he knew it she was leaning in...at least that was what he told himself. He didn't acknowledge the fact that if she hadn't compared him to Cedric he probably would have let her lips touch his. Just to see what it was like...he'd daydreamed about it for so long last year...

"Johnson and Montague are neck-and-neck!" Lee's voice carried to him, even from across the room. "They're both doing an impressive

move, but...oh! And Johnson gets the upper hand!" Harry grinned at the lump of dark gray owl poop at his feet. "Angelina scores!"

All they needed was thirty more points and they would have passed Slytherin. Harry made a mental note to give Angelina a big, tight embrace when next he saw her. She had been worried. With good reason. Even though things had been strained between them because of what happened, he felt that if they won this match, despite the enemy's best efforts to sabotage them, everything would be okay again.

Tuesday night, after what Ron described as a rather long and grueling practice drill, Angelina had returned to the common room perhaps an hour after everyone else had gone up to bed. Harry had been waiting for her, though truthfully he didn't really know what he had planned to do. Just talk, really. But, upon greeting her, Harry immediately noticed that something was off. She looked pale, even with her skin tone, and withdrawn.

"What's wrong?" he'd asked, seriously.

Angelina merely shook her head. "Nothing..."

"Yes there is," Harry stood close to her and tried to force her to look at him. "What is it? Ron said practice was okay. He said you worked on a lot of good stuff...you don't think it went well?"

"It went well."

Harry frowned, a little put off by her vague answers. She would not look at him. He noticed then that she was kind of dirty. He supposed that being the kind of person she was, Angelina put her whole body and heart into Quidditch, so the fact that she had gotten dirty during a practice drill should not have come as a surprise. But, as he observed her sitting down tiredly on the chaise lounge with her head leaned back and her eyes closed, he saw that her knees were soiled. Her Quidditch robes had a tear in them at the shoulder, and the palm of her right hand was red as if it had been pushing hard against something. Harry's eyes moved from her hand to her hair, his chest

becoming thick with a sense of foreboding, and he noticed that she had dried dirt and dead leaves tangled within the delicate ebony locks.

“What happened?” he said sharply.

Angelina jumped, startled at his harsh voice, and her eyes opened. She looked at him finally. He waited. She said clearly: “Nothing...”

Harry didn’t know all of her faces yet. This one was blank, unblinking, and matter-of-fact. He could not sense any emotion behind it, and when he looked into her eyes all he saw was weariness.

“Why did it take you so long to get back?” he asked, gently this time.

“I was thinking. Just thinking.”

“Bout what?” Harry couldn’t help the questions—she was acting oddly and he wanted to get to the bottom of it. He sat next to her, reaching out to take her hand. She watched him, her eyes on his, as he laced his fingers with hers and rubbed the back of her thumb softly.

“About the match, of course,” came her quiet reply. “I’m not sure if Ron is ready.”

“He said the practice went well...”

“It did, he’s improving, but he still gets nervous and loses focus.”

“Well what about the plays you came up with? Those’ll help you guys keep the upper-hand, scoring-wise right?”

“They should...” Angelina’s eyes narrowed and she turned to stare into the fireplace. Harry was struggling with his desire to ask her more questions. Whatever she had been thinking about while she’d been away had upset her; that was plain to see. He suspected that there was something else behind it, but he couldn’t guess what. This frustrated him, but he didn’t want to push her. He turned and looked into the fire with her. They sat close to each other on the couch for a while until she slipped her hand from his and stood up. “I need a shower.”

She left his side without saying anything else and went upstairs. Harry wanted to wait, but he knew she wouldn't come back down. Feeling a little rejected, he went up to bed. He guessed that girls went through these things sometimes...nothing for it but to be patient. She was under a lot of stress; he could definitely understand that.

The next couple of days passed and Angelina's mood got a little better, but not much. They hardly saw each other between classes, and when they did they just sat and talked, though Harry did most of that. He even asked Fred before dinner the night of the D.A. meeting if this was something that happened to Angelina a lot. Fred had shrugged at him. "You know girls, mate. There's always something up their arses."

Harry had rolled his eyes impatiently. "Yeah, but something is really wrong with her. She's not herself."

Taking a serious tone, Fred nodded his agreement. "Yeah. I know what you mean. I've tried to cheer her up but she's been a bit meaner with me and George lately than she usually is."

"D'you think it's just the match, then? All the stress with Umbridge and training new players?" He had asked Hermione.

"Probably. But don't push her, Harry. Let her work it out on her own."

And the next day, during their free period, Angelina had burst into the common room near tears, her face flushed with angry panic and her chest heaving. "SOMEONE'S STOLEN MY PLAYBOOK!" she shouted at the top of her lungs, nearly hyperventilating from the emotion coursing through her.

Harry had jumped up from his chair, his fists clenched as if ready to strike at some phantom attacker. "What?"

The lot of them (Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Dean, and Neville) gaped at her, gobsmacked by the force of her declaration. She stood wide-eyed and shaking, her eyes flying from one stunned face to the next, before they landing on Harry and she burst into tears. This time

Hermione stood up as Harry took hold of his girlfriend and pressed her warmly to himself, truly at a loss for what to say.

"Who do you think would have...?" Hermione asked him, but he glared at her as if it should be obvious. Malfoy...he mouthed to her as Angelina sobbed in his arms.

When she had calmed down, she told them that she'd gone to fetch it from her locker in the changing rooms so she could make a few notes and found it missing. Her lock had been blasted open by someone's wand and the door to the locker was barely on its hinges.

"It's gone! It's all gone! All my plays, my notes, everything!" Harry felt her squeeze him very hard, her hands clinging to his shirt, though she didn't cry. She was angry. And he was right along with her. "What are we going to do? The match is tomorrow!"

"It was Malfoy that done it, and we're gonna clobber him!" George had angrily declared when retold the story by Ron and Harry. They had left Angelina with Hermione and Ginny, who were doing their best to console her. Harry's ribs ached a little from her vise-like hold on him. He didn't care, though; he wanted nothing more than to go and beat the snot out of Malfoy.

"How d'you know it was him?" Katie Bell had asked.

"Are you mad?" Ron shouted. "Of course it was!"

"Yes but do you have proof?"

Harry never fancied the idea of hitting girls, but Katie was asking for a good slap. He blinked at her impatiently. "I don't need any bloody proof, I know he's got it and he's fucking going to give it back or I'll kill him!"

They all gasped—it was maybe the first time he had said such a foul curse word where anyone could hear. Fred and George grinned, impressed. Ron gave a small huff of laughter and Katie just looked offended.

"Fine," she snapped, crossing her arms indignantly. "Go and get yourself expelled if you want. But I'm telling you no one will take you seriously if you can't prove it was Malfoy who stole our playbook." He breathed angrily through his nostrils at her for several seconds before he realized that she was right. "Her locker is jinxed so that whoever tampers with it gets long-term crossed eyes." Katie said evenly, ignoring Harry's angry expression.

"Okay. So we look for the bloke with crossed eyes." Ron suggested.

Harry shook his head. "Draco's eyes are fine. We saw him on our way to Divination, remember?"

"Well there you go." Katie said as if the matter was settled.

"That doesn't mean anything!" Harry snapped. "He could've gone to the hospital wing to get them fixed."

"So, why don't we go to the damned hospital wing and ask Madame Pomfrey?" Fred cut in, becoming annoyed with Katie and Harry's stand-off. They all trooped down to the wing, Harry leading the way. Madame Pomfrey seemed extremely put-upon and annoyed by their virtual attack of questions and she hushed them into silence.

"What in Merlin's name is the matter with you lot?" she asked, exasperated, looking at each of them in turn.

"We were just wondering..." Harry asked, trying to make his voice innocently curious. "Did anyone come to you in the last couple of days to uncross their eyes?"

She frowned at him. "That's an odd question, Potter."

"Have they?"

Still looking at him as if he were up to something, she nodded slowly. "Yes. Beefy young man. One of those gloomy Slytherin boys. He said his friend jinxed him in a fight. Well he seemed like the fighting type so I gave him a good stern talking to and fixed him right up." She

sighed pleasantly, then. “Sometimes I find it’s better to scold them myself, rather than reporting them. It’s almost always an accident, poor things, and with the questionable methods going on in this place now-days, I don’t hesitate to offer students my support.”

Satisfied that she had been talking about either Crabbe or Goyle, Harry turned to Katie triumphantly when Pomfrey went back to her duties. Katie scowled at him but relented that he was right to suspect Malfoy. As they were making their way out, Harry was called back.

“Yes M’am?” Harry watched Pomfrey approach him, thinking that maybe she had forgotten to give him some detail about his inquiry. Instead she produced a tiny vial of clear liquid and a handful of cotton balls.

“The Headmaster mentioned that you had a little...eh...thing.” Her eyes swept across his neck. He frowned. “It looks like it’s gone, now, but this is for...future use. A little dab provides instant removal. There you go; nothing to be embarrassed about.” She stuffed the vial and cotton balls into his hands and smiled. “I was once a young lady myself, you know.”

Harry thanked her a bit awkwardly and shoved the things into his pockets; eyeing Fred, George, Ron, and Katie threateningly; just daring them to say a word.

Now, thinking back on it, Harry realized he ought to have known that this bit of information they obtained would do little good. Hermione had put that to bed almost instantly. “Harry, that’s just not enough to go off accusing anybody.”

“But what other ‘beefy, gloomy’ Slytherin kids who’re the ‘fighting type’ do you know Hermione?”

“That’s not the point and you know it. Umbridge—who is the deciding voice on any and all punishments I’d like to remind you—will make out that there are loads of people that fit that description, or else dismiss it as simply not enough evidence to suggest wrong-doing.”

"So let me get this straight." Harry's shoulders stiffened as he narrowed his eyes, gesturing with his hand at nothing in particular. "You're telling me that even though someone stole all of the plays Angelina came up with right out of her locker, there is nothing we can do about it? We're just going to have to wait and see which team uses the stuff she wrote?"

"I'm afraid so..." Hermione said in a small voice, adding hastily when Harry opened his mouth to retort: "I know it's terribly unfair, but Harry you shouldn't attack Malfoy and get yourself thrown out over this!"

"Hermione is right," Angelina spoke from her position curled up on his bed. Harry turned his gaze to her, his demeanor softening. She had been like that for an hour after dinner, just laying there on his bed with her knees drawn up and his small quilt that Molly Weasley had knitted for him last winter wrapped tightly around herself. She sat up now, the quilt sliding from her shoulders. "There isn't anything we can do about it."

Harry wanted to protest some more. "That's ridiculous--!" but she raised a hand to silence him.

"Harry just drop it!" she snapped, her pretty face quivering with tears she was forcing back. "We can't go to Umbridge and we can't go after Malfoy, so just leave it alone. I'll have to deal with it." He watched her hop off his bed and smooth down her skirt, smiling at him sadly before stepping past him towards the door. "I came up with those plays and my team is going to use them. We'll see what happens."

With that, she left them.

Harry regretted that he hadn't been able to see her this morning: he'd been here, in this damned shite-covered Owlery, scrubbing for Snape's sick amusement.

"I don't see how you can hope to finish if you keep scrubbing the life out of the same patch of wall, Potter," Snape spoke, almost on cue. Harry rose up from his thoughts and saw that he had been cleaning the same spot the whole time. Sighing, he turned and found another spot; his arm was mid-scrub when he heard Lee Jordan yelling. Harry

stopped and his head flew up at Snape, who abruptly abandoned his glowering at Harry to turn towards the noise, too. The man's obvious zeal for the game would have been comical to Harry if he weren't covered in dried-foulness.

"Looks like she's almost got it! Malfoy is giving her a run for it! OH, don't take that, Ginny, there you go! And...and...and..." Please, please, get it, Ginny! Harry screamed at her with his mind, trying to drive his hope at her like a paper airplane in the wind. "YES! GINNY WEASLEY CAUGHT THE SNITCH AND GRYFFINDOR WINS!"

Harry jumped up and gave a whoop of triumph, causing Snape to turn around sharply to rebuke him. The wizard was pleasantly surprised, however, to find that the owls Harry had disturbed were flapping all around him, hooting angrily. Not attempting to suppress his smile, Snape watched as the owls cuffed the boy about the head with their huge wings for a minute or two before lazily telling him to get back to work.

Chapter Sixteen: Draco's Game

Though the night air was damp and chilly, the players on the Gryffindor Quidditch team were all sweating; their robes clinging to them; their hair matted to their heads...Angelina hurled the Quaffle at Ron Weasley as hard as she could. His pale, sweat-mopped face and wet red hair seemed to vibrate with anticipation as he watched it coming. She hovered on her broom, watching him...block it. Block it!

Ron turned his broom sharply, the tail end of it slamming into the Quaffle, sending it back towards her with rocketing force. The whole team gave a cheer, and Ron's cheeks flushed as he grinned with relief. Angelina swooped down and caught the ball, beaming across the pitch at him.

"Good job, Ron! That was three out of five, not bad at all!"

On that happy note, Angelina decided that perhaps it was time to end the two hour practice. Though for her it wasn't nearly enough time, especially to get the new players settled in, she saw that the team members were getting really tired. Ginny Weasley looked knackered, but happy—she sat on her broom breathing hard, sweating, and smiling from ear to ear at Ron.

Angelina blew her whistle again and motioned for them to come to her. They formed a large circle in the middle of the pitch, Ron bringing it to a close. Angelina looked over them all, the new players among them, and reasoned that she had to be satisfied with what she had. The absence of George, Harry, and Fred was palpable and a little saddening, but the group that had replaced them; especially Ginny; had done well enough tonight for her to hold on to a shred of hope. Even though it was late-September, the air was beginning to feel heavy and hot, such was their exhaustion.

"You guys did good," Angelina breathed into the silence. The stands behind them towered dark and empty, and the overhead lights beamed down on them all, illuminating their drained faces. "I think you need to work on your maneuvering, though Kirk. You keep getting in the way of the Bludger, rather than beating it back, but I'm sure that'll improve if you keep practicing." She went on to speak to

them each in turn about their weak points, offering advice on how they could improve, ending with Ron. "I cannot stress enough, Ron: focus. Don't let anything but those goal rings and that Quaffle enter your mind, got it? You're a good player; you just need to put your blinders on when you find yourself getting distracted." Ron nodded seriously. "Okay," Angelina sighed. "Other than that, I think we can call it quits for tonight, eh?"

They all smiled at her, thankful for her words of encouragement. Of course, they all knew that they would have to work double-hard, but none of them seemed to have any objection to it. She dismissed them and led the way back down to the grass where they dismounted their brooms and walked silently back down into the changing rooms. Angelina stayed behind and began to gather up the balls and other practice equipment.

"Need help there?" Dean asked, walking backwards. She shook her head. She liked doing this alone; it gave her a chance to go over things in her head. Dean gave her a salute and turned to jog back. Angelina forced the struggling Bludgers back under the straps that held them into the equipment trunk and sighed. Better watch yourself, Johnson, Wood had told her once as she helped him carry the trunk back to the changing rooms. If I didn't know any better, I'd think you took this a little too seriously. She had scoffed at him and retorted that he was one to talk. Angelina smiled to herself and the empty arena, very happy that she was able to carry (well, levitate; Wood preferred to do it manually but Angelina was content to use magic) this trunk back all on her own. She thought perhaps if Wood were here, he might be proud of how she was handling things.

The wind picked up, and she fancied she heard the distant crackling of thunder. It wasn't going to rain tonight, but if and when it did she hoped that it would not be the day of the match. When she was making her way down the passage that lead to the changing rooms, she was met with most of the team, who were already finished and on their way back to the castle.

"We'll wait if you want, Angie." Alicia suggested. Angelina considered but shook her head. "You're sure?"

"Yeah. Still got some thinking to do."

"Okay but don't miss curfew."

"Sure thing. See ya."

Angelina's eyes caught Ginny Weasley's for a second and she found herself wondering not for the first time what it was the girl had said to Harry earlier that day. She had already reasoned that there was no need to be jealous and she didn't really like those kinds of childish emotions anyway; especially when they crept up on her like this. She decided, as she waved them all goodnight, that she didn't need to know.

Once the equipment trunk was stowed safely where it belonged, Angelina tiredly walked over to her locker and retrieved her things. She was too worn out to change; she'd just wait till she had taken a shower. Stuffing her school clothes into her bag, she jumped when her playbook fell from the top shelf of the locker. Angelina picked it up from the floor and opened it. Past the many pages of notes on popular new moves the international Quidditch teams were using that she wanted to show the others, and right before her own invented maneuvers, were the drawings she'd done of Harry. She watched the Flying Harry's zoom across the pages excitedly, chuckling a little as the Flying Harry being chased by Bludgers dodged a nasty pounding from one only to be done in by the other. On the next page was the half-finished one she'd done of his handsome face. The half that was complete smiled at her. Next to that was the sketch of the two of them kissing; little girly hearts floated above their heads.

"I really should throw these away..."

But when the sketch-version of Harry winked at her and leaned over to kiss the sketch-version of herself, Angelina decided to let them be for now. She could toss them later. She'd been telling herself that for days, but she couldn't help the giddiness that bubbled beneath her usually serious demeanor when she looked at them. Angelina took a spare quill from the shelf and made a note in one of the margins: KIRK—MANEUVERING! WEASLEY—FOCUS!

She underlined Ron's problem several times before putting the book back on the shelf and closing the locker. She picked up her bag, got her wand out, and aimed it at the lock.

"Cross your eyes and hope to die." She uttered. The lock shivered a little, glowed warm blue and the charm sealed itself. It was something she had made up (akin to the homemade spell Ron had tried on his rat Scabbers a long time ago, only hers actually worked). The little charm worked very well, and nobody knew what the incantation was. Anyone tampering with it would learn that having their eyes crossed for longer than a few seconds (try a few days) was no laughing matter. She thanked her best mates Fred and George for schooling her in that sort of craftiness.

Angelina gathered her things up and waved her wand, muttering the incantation that quietly bade the lights go out.

He watched her, from a distance, very unsure of what he would do. True, he had a task at hand, but her suddenly being on her own was something he had not expected. What was it about her that infuriated him so?

Maybe it wasn't just her, but Potter as well. The pair of them, so comfortable with each other, even though he had done everything he could to make them squirm. He watched her levitate the trunk across the field and down into the darkness of the small tunnel that lead to the changing rooms. Seconds later many of the Gryffindor players emerged, calling out to her as they made their way towards him. He stepped back several paces, very quickly, and disappeared into the shadows of the trees behind him until they had passed. He watched them amble up the path leading back to the castle, their shoulders slumped with fatigue but their voices raised excitedly as they huddled together. He recognized most of them, including that little snot Ron Weasley and his brat sister. After that, the two new Beaters emerged, a few paces behind. No sign of her yet. And no sign of Crabbe and Goyle, either.

Draco Malfoy clenched his jaw with impatience. If they didn't hurry up they would miss curfew, and then they'd have a teacher to answer to if they were caught wandering the halls after hours. He didn't want to

risk that, especially carrying what he had come for. But then again, in due time he would have a solution for that as well.

There was a cracking noise like a twig being snapped under a heavy foot, and Draco turned around, his eyes wide with alarm, to see the two oafish boys he called friends come shuffling towards him. He held a hand up to stop them moving any further and turned to squint at the retreating backs of the group of Gryffindors. Once he was sure they were well out of range, and had almost disappeared in the shadows as they walked the path back to the castle, he furrowed his brow and lowered his hand.

"Took you long enough," he whispered, staring at them.

Crabbe, usually the smarter one though that wasn't saying much, shrugged and gestured toward the entrance to the pitch.

"We heard voices. People still in there?"

Draco shook his head impatiently. "They were but they've gone back up, now. Only one left is Johnson."

"So we should wait?" Goyle asked quietly.

Draco stared at him until the boy realized that yes, they should wait. He often wondered why he bothered with these two. Aside from their extreme loyalty and willingness to do almost anything he asked, they could be such a headache sometimes. But it helped to have them around when he found himself being threatened. Of course, that usually depended on who was doing the threatening. Draco's eyes narrowed as he watched Angelina Johnson emerge from the tunnel that led to the changing rooms, carrying her school bag, which looked stuffed to capacity. He hoped that what he'd come for wasn't in there.

"Why are we doing this, Draco?" Crabbe asked him in a whisper.

Draco sneered, his eyes still on the ever-approaching Angelina. "Because we can," he said simply. "I want it."

"But what if we're caught?"

"If you two do exactly as I told you, we won't be. Besides, I've got a little insurance plan for that. Now shut up, she's coming."

They all hushed and moved back into the shadow of the nearby trees, just as she had reached the gate. As soon as she stepped across the threshold, the lights towering over the pitch went out, showering her in darkness. Draco watched her pass them, making her way up the same path that her friends had moments ago. His eyes burned into her back. He felt something...felt the tingling of barely-contained malice simmering beneath his pale skin all over. Why did she anger him so?

Pansy Parkinson's obnoxious, nasal voice flitted at him: "That's not true, Draco. We've kissed before and I liked it just fine." He thought when she said this to him that if he could turn her into a bug with his wand he would not hesitate to squash her. Liked it just fine, had she? He seemed to remember her complaining about how cold his hands and lips were. She hadn't been alive to him for a long time after that and when he did let her come groveling back he didn't touch her much. Of course, if he felt the urge to, she would tolerate him, but he knew she was only putting on that she liked it so she wouldn't be turned away from his circle again. It made him want to hit something just thinking about it.

Draco shook his head hard, bringing himself back to the present. That was beside the point! He wanted those plays right now. Or more specifically, that book. The plays were something he could use, yes, but he really just wanted the book.

"She's not coming back. You two go in, and be quiet about it."

The two boys began creeping towards where Angelina had come. The gate was locked, as all students should've been back at the castle by then and curfew was less than half an hour away. They turned to him and shrugged. He rolled his eyes and motioned impatiently that they would have to climb over. He then turned his gaze to the path ahead, where Angelina had disappeared. He could catch her if he ran...

"Hey, where are you going, Draco?" Crabbe hissed at him, groaning a little as he helped Goyle hoist himself up.

"I'm keeping watch for teachers. Hurry it up, will you?"

Before either of them could protest he was off, at first walking very quickly and then breaking into a jog up the path.

Harry was thankful his own owl spent most of her time in his room and not among these ruthless beasts. Talk about a bad influence...

He watched, still a bit wary from the attack of the owls, as Snape sighed and gave a flick of his wand. The space they were in instantly changed and the owl droppings disappeared. Of course, seconds after that, one of the lot hooted and dropped a present for the two wizards, almost daring them to clean that up.

Harry was incensed. Snape had had him cleaning for a further three hours after the match was over. It was well on the way to being dinner time and the boy was starving, filthy, and smelly. His fingers ached from all the scrubbing and the chill in the air did little to improve the injustice of it all.

"Not bad, Potter," Snape said snidely. "I told Filch you wouldn't be able to complete half as much as you did. Seems I owe him for our wager." A slight smile turned up the corner of his thin mouth before he jerked his thumb to the door. "Go and get cleaned up."

Harry stomped past the contemptuous sod and breathed in the fresh air once outside in the rapidly darkening evening.

He jogged down the stone steps that led up to the Owlery and hopped the last two, not looking back to where he knew Snape was following behind him. He quickened his pace, anxious to be in the comfort and warmth of a long shower. And when I'm clean I'll give Angelina that victory kiss I promised her, he thought to himself, smiling a little as he climbed the incline leading up to the front of the castle. Harry hesitated before stepping up to the great doors. He was filthy and didn't really fancy the idea of walking through the school smelling like owl crap. He was on the point of turning around to find

an alternate route when Snape appeared behind him and erected a pointed finger straight ahead. "Keep walking, Potter."

"But, sir..."

Snape's dark eyes shimmered. "Surely you don't want to avoid your fellow Gryffindors? They'll want to see you...to celebrate your...victory." His voice became hard and flat when he said the last words, and this at least gave Harry a small poke of satisfaction. The Potions Master was sore that his precious Slytherins had lost the match, despite their sneakiest and most disgraceful efforts. He would attempt to humiliate Harry until the very last, which meant yes he would have to walk through the halls stinking of owl poop and looking as if he swam in the stuff for fun.

Harry sighed and turned around again, leading the way through the towering doors, vaguely aware that his crust-covered hair was sticking up. He avoided everyone's gaze and walked as quickly as he could, but before he reached the stairs he was startled half-to-death by a great, thunderous roaring sound. His head flew up and he saw that Luna Lovegood was standing on the landing, a big smile on her face. She was also wearing a hat that really wasn't a hat but a giant lion's head. Her wand was poised at its mane. She tapped the mane and the lion roared in Harry's face again, blowing back his hair and scattering dusty foulness onto Snape's robes.

"Hi, Harry." Luna called dreamily.

Harry made a face somewhere between a frown and a smile and lifted his hand in an awkward wave. "Hey, Luna..."

"Gryffindor won the match."

"Yeah I know."

Luna's smile slipped from her face very quickly and was replaced by blankness that only hinted at curiosity. "Why are you covered in shi--?"

"Take that silly thing off this instant, Lovegood, before I confiscate it!" Snape snarled at her.

Luna looked at Snape and narrowed her eyes, but tapped her wand against the lion's mane obediently. Rather than roaring again, it shrank into a rather furry representation of what seemed like a normal hat. She reached up and removed it from her blonde head, tucking it safely under her arm. Snape did his favorite pointing thing again and Luna walked off in the direction he indicated, towards the Great Hall.

The Potions Master gave Harry one last sinister look before sweeping up his black robes (a little too grandly; perhaps to rid them of the few particles of dung that Luna's lion had blown his way) and headed after her. Harry didn't watch him go; he turned sharply and sprinted up the stairs, not pausing to retort to a few kids' derisive laughter at his appearance. He just hoped some of the stuff he was covered in rubbed off on them as he passed.

First person he saw when he entered the dorm was Ron.

Harry didn't want to give his best friend time to laugh at him, so he called out a quick "Congratulations, gotta take a shower, gimme a few and we'll walk down together, see ya."

He had grabbed his towel from the furnace and was halfway out the door before he noticed that Ron had not said a word and wasn't even looking at Harry. The dirty boy turned, his hand still on the doorknob, and peered over at his friend. Ron was sitting on his bed, his knees drawn up to his chest, staring into space. His face was very pale, and his lips were pressed tightly together as if he was suppressing the urge to moan loudly. Harry decided that, even though his skin was beginning to itch from the damp foulness that was seeping through the fabric of his clothes, his shower could wait...just a bit.

Scratching his arm absentmindedly, Harry walked over to Ron's bed and stood facing him. "Hey...what's wrong with you?" At first Ron just twitched a little, but otherwise gave no sign that he had heard Harry. Trying a different tactic, Harry attempted to sound casual as he said: "Come on, you didn't do that badly. That stupid song would've distracted anyone."

Ron simply shook his head, closing his eyes briefly before letting out the smallest of sighs. Harry was becoming quite lost for encouraging things to say, but Ron opened his mouth, closed it, and then opened it again. "It's not the match..."

Harry was confused. He tilted his head at the lanky boy sitting before him, trying to ignore the strong desire to scratch his crotch. What an odd place for the stuff to wind up—he needed a shower badly. "Well if it's not that, then what's wrong?"

"If I asked you to kill me—just out of pity-like, you'd do it right?" Ron looked quite serious as he turned his pale, miserable face to Harry. Harry opened his mouth stupidly, but Ron moaned loudly and threw himself backward onto the bed, rolling over to bury his face in his pillow.

"Ron, for Merlin's sake, what is it?" Harry used the opportunity afforded him when Ron rolled over to scratch himself and mentally breathed a sigh of relief.

"I fisked Jermilony!" came Ron's extremely muffled voice from deep within the pillow that he had smashed into his face.

"What?"

The boy heaved a great, shaking sigh and turned over slightly, still not completely facing Harry. "I said...I kissed Hermione!"

Harry was so baffled by this news that he merely blinked at Ron in surprise, his mouth hanging open but absolutely nothing coming out of it. He scrunched up his face, looking from bed to bed as if Dean or Seamus or Neville, who were absent, would offer him help. Ron let out another moan.

"Okay..." said Harry carefully. "Um...well...w-why did you do that, Ron?"

"Because I like her, you sod!" Ron oozed. "And I thought...oh I dunno what I was thinking but it's all gone to hell, now."

Harry could not suppress the sympathetic smile that was fighting its way across his lips. Ron sat up and turned around, his face now flushed from being pressed into the pillow. He picked the soft mound of fabric and feathers up and began squeezing the daylights out of it as he stared at the furnace, probably reminiscing the scene.

“So what happened? I mean...that’s great that you guys finally admit—”

Ron scoffed bitterly. “She hasn’t admitted anything! That’s the problem!”

Harry scratched himself again, this time not caring if Ron saw or not. He needed a shower, but he was willing to suffer a little longer for his friend’s benefit. “Okay, then. Why don’t you just tell me what happened?”

Ron heaved a sigh and began: “Well you ‘member I told you about our last row?” Harry nodded. It had been the reason Ron had not come to fetch him for Snape’s class. The two of them had gotten into an argument about Viktor Krum again, and had been so distracted by each other that they had completely forgotten about Harry. “Well, I didn’t tell you that she said ‘at least Viktor knows how to treat a lady, which is more than I can say for you’ all sullen like she was still mad at me for not asking her to the ball. So I figured that maybe she wasn’t just mad about that, you know? Maybe she was mad ‘cause she likes me and she knows I like her, but she thought maybe if I asked her to the ball we’d finally have admitted it or something stupid and girly like that...”

“Uh huh...” Harry scratched behind his ear.

“Well she hasn’t really spoken to me properly since then, has she? She keeps shooting me nasty looks and such. I hate it when she’s mad at me, Harry, I really do. But I can’t help being an idiot coward! I know I should’ve told her sooner, but what am I supposed to say?”

“Well...” Harry thought it was rather obvious but decided to let Ron continue.

"So I got to thinking about you and Angelina. You guys are moving along pretty nice. Maybe Hermione sees this and maybe she's thinking it would be great if...you know..." Harry didn't but he let his friend babble on. "I dunno what I was thinking...I just hate having her mad at me. And I do really like her, Harry. I guess you knew that already, though, didn't you?"

"Kind of." He was seized by a fiery itching under his armpit and jerked a little, causing Ron to raise his eyebrows. Harry simply scratched and gestured for Ron to keep going.

"This morning I made up my mind I'd tell her." Ron was still squeezing the pillow, and this time he slammed his fist into it. "I couldn't eat my breakfast I was so nervous...I walked with her down to the pitch, and I was trying the whole way to think of something bold to say. Just come right out with it, like Angelina did to you..." Ron's eyes narrowed as he glared at the furnace like it had caused all his troubles. "Had an idea. At the time it seemed brilliant, but of course now I realize that I must be a complete nutter."

"What'd you do?"

"I-I just kissed her. Planted one right on her. She'd been standing there waiting for me to spit out whatever it was I was gonna say so she could go with Luna to sit down, and I just...I-I thought it would be romantic and cool and it might even boost my confidence for the match a little, but..."

"What did she say?"

Ron shook his head dejectedly. "Nothing. She just turned a funny shade of yellow like she was gonna be sick or something, grabbed Luna, and ran away...." He ran his fingernails across the pillow's surface, grimacing at the memory of it. "Just say it. I'm done for."

Harry stood thinking for a few seconds whilst Ron closed his eyes as if awaiting his execution.

"Okay, two things: first, I gotta go take a shower."

Ron made a face at Harry as if just now noticing that he was there. He sniffed. "You smell awful. What did Snape have you doing?"

"Not worth talking about. But I promise I'll help you figure out this Hermione thing when I come back, okay?"

"Right...take your time. I'm not going anywhere ever again."

Harry felt a pang of sympathy for his miserable friend, but could no longer ignore the pressing need to wash off. He grabbed up his towel again, which he had dropped after the sharp itch under his armpit, and ran out of the room.

Harry had not been able to convince Ron to come down to dinner. It was a funny kind of *déjà vu*; he remembered quite vividly not wanting to see or talk to anyone after the fateful practice drill that got him banned from the team, and Ron and Neville trying to lure him downstairs with food. This didn't work when the roles were reversed, either, Harry came to find out.

"Okay, but I'm starving..."

"Just go. We can talk later. I need to be alone..."

Harry promised a bit lamely to bring Ron back something and that they would talk as soon as dinner was over. Ron merely shrugged faintly and buried his face in his pillow again. Poor bloke, Harry thought as he jogged down the hall. And I thought I was hopeless with girls...

Girls.

Angelina.

He had not seen her. Of course, she was probably eating dinner like everyone else (his stomach growled loudly), but something in Harry made him hesitate to get to her. He remembered her attitude for the last few days, ever since the night of the practice drill. He had felt like she was being distant with him, even when they were right next to

each other. Besides that, they hadn't shared more than a few quick kisses since the last time they were together in Seamus' bed. He had chalked it all up to stress: her playbook had been stolen and he had gotten himself kicked off the team and well it was a lot to heap on the shoulders of a captain in her last year who also had preparing for N.E.W.T.'s to worry about and who knew what else.

Harry jogged down the stairs, trying to decide whether or not he would find her in a better mood because they had won the match or a worse one because she'd had to endure playing with a team who'd used her own moves against her. Certain details of Lee Jordan's commentary had not been lost on him.

He was at the point of starting on another set of stairs when he saw Draco Malfoy and Delores Umbridge emerging from her office. Harry reacted instantly, jumping back to the shelter of the hallway that turned off Umbridge's, his ears tingling and his forehead becoming warm with anticipation. They hadn't noticed the streak of color that had been his body flying back into the shadows, much to his relief, because they were still talking in hushed voices, just at the threshold of her office.

"I don't see what you have that can be of any use to me, Malfoy..." Umbridge was saying with false sweetness.

"It's not what I have, but what I can do."

"Oh?" Harry imagined her impish smile curling up to the ceiling with intrigue. "And what is that, may I ask?"

"You have to do something first." Malfoy said flatly. There was a pause. Harry strained to hear, though he couldn't do much more than stand on tiptoes because if he moved any closer to the edge of the wall he would be exposed to them. His heart thumped loudly in his ears, annoying him. Umbridge said something so low he couldn't hear her, and then Malfoy responded: "Oh yes you will. Especially if you want Potter out for good. You need dirt on him, and you're not getting it on your own, 'else you'd have sent him packing by now."

"I will not allow you to manipulate --"

"With all due respect, Professor, I think we both know who really manipulates things around here. I know what my father did for you, you know...and if the Minister finds out you're toast."

Harry could hardly stand it. He could've been in Barnabas the Barmey's ballet; he was standing so on edge. His insides boiled with contempt for both of them, but at the same time he was almost giddy with excitement that finally he had caught Malfoy and Umbridge scheming against him. And this new piece of info: this thing that Draco's father had done for her...this sounded even more important. If he could just hear what it was...if they would just say it, he would have something on that loathsome bitch! Of course, this thing was not mentioned again, and Harry wanted to stamp his foot. He listened on...

"What do you want?"

"What you want, Professor." It was Malfoy's turn to adopt a sticky-sweet tone. "I want Potter out. I can get you dirt on him, but you have to help me help you."

"And how will I do that?" Umbridge sounded dark...almost hungry for Harry's blood. This disturbed him and the excitement he felt ebbed away to actual fear.

"You're the High Inquisitor, aren't you? Make it so I have some authority around here."

She scoffed. "Authority? What kind of authority would I give a little sneak like you?"

"The kind that makes it possible for me to do my sneaking without people, especially teachers, breathing down my neck."

"There's something else, though, isn't there? What Professor McGonagall was raving about was true...you did steal that playbook, didn't you?"

Harry's heart sped up. Oh how he wished he had someone else with him. Someone unbiased like Luna or even blasted Zach Smith so he could finally prove to everyone that both Umbridge and Malfoy were rotten through and through. There was the longest pause yet and Harry felt himself slipping from tiptoe position. He lowered himself to normal footing, but remained plastered to the wall that hid him. He wanted desperately to peak around the corner and glimpse their scheming faces, but he didn't dare.

"I wouldn't worry about that if I were you," Draco said simply, much to Harry's disappointment. But he supposed that even if Draco admitted right out that he'd stolen it, it sounded laughably as if it would not matter to Umbridge. The fact that she already suspected and had not taken any disciplinary action against him was suggestive enough. McGonagall had probably noticed something amiss at the match, confronted Angelina about it, and upon hearing that the book was stolen, attempted to rectify the situation. And perhaps as further payback for overriding her decision to permanently disband the Gryffindor team, Umbridge—being the final word on punishments and the like—had turned a deaf ear. He deduced this in seconds and Draco's voice brought him out of it: "You should just know that I know Potter and his stupid friends are up to something...I only have to figure out what."

"It's obvious that they are, Malfoy. I fail to see what exceptional qualities you possess that will allow you to uncover it faster or better than I can."

"You think you've got them, but you don't. Just write to the Minister already, will you? I expect you'll post another of your decrees, giving me, Crabbe, and Goyle special authority under you in no time."

"You and two others?" She tittered sourly. "I hardly think I could ask Cornelius to give three students such special--!"

"You can and you will. Or I'll go to my father and then it's all over for you, Delores."

Yet another, rather heavy pause occurred and she responded stiffly: "We are late for dinner. I shall see what I can do."

“Fine.”

He heard movement and then the unmistakable sound of footsteps coming toward him. Umbridge called out Draco’s name and the footsteps stopped. “Do not ever address me so informally again, is that clear?” There was silence in response and the footfalls started up again. Shortly after Umbridge’s loud clacking shoes could be heard heading off in the opposite direction. Harry slid backward along the wall quickly and was about to dive under a heavy window curtain when he froze, his mind racing. Draco was getting nearer. What should he do...? What did he want to do? Confront him...but no, that would not be good. He needed to find out where that playbook was being hidden. He needed to tell Hermione and the others that Draco was joining forces with Umbridge. His feet didn’t move. He wanted...Harry didn’t know exactly what sense any of his desires at the moment made, but it was too late, Draco was turning the corner and...

“Potter.”

“What?” Harry stared at Draco, making his face blank. He had managed to shove his hands in his pockets and had one foot half-off the ground as if he’d been walking along, minding his own business...

Draco blinked and watched him hard for a moment before relaxing his shoulders and adopting a ‘speak of the devil...’ smile. “How was detention?”

Harry clenched his jaw and ‘continued walking’; making like he was going to pass Draco and keep on down the stairs he’d been about to descend before he heard the voices. He turned around as he and Draco touched shoulders, however, walking backwards, and said, “I see even using stolen plays can’t help your pathetic team beat ours at Quidditch, huh, Malfoy?”

Draco’s features tensed for a split second but then his smile reappeared. “Oh. That. Well...” He shrugged casually. “That Weasel brat was just lucky Hooch picked a weak Snitch, is all. That thing

must be a hundred years old; it was sputtering along like a bruised butterfly."

"Then why couldn't you catch it?"

Again, Malfoy's face stiffened. He seemed to be stuck for a response and Harry was satisfied that he'd silenced the creep. He was about to continue on to the Great Hall, fully in motion to turn around and book it down there so he could tell Ron and Hermione everything he had just heard. But, of course, Malfoy's desire to have the last word could always be counted upon.

"You know...I think I get why you drool over Johnson so much. She likes it rough, eh?"

"What did you say?" Harry stopped walking abruptly and glared at his enemy. He dropped all pretense and drew his hands out of his pockets, his eyes burning deep into Draco's.

"You heard me, Potter." Draco's callous smile grew wider and his eyes glinted with genuine maliciousness. "Oh didn't she tell you yet? No...I imagine not. Didn't want you getting all jealous and blowing that crazy bean of yours." The blond stepped closer to him, now standing mere inches away. Harry's teeth would crack at any moment, he was staring so hard at him. "Understandable, really. What bloke could resist such a feisty gal?"

"Watch your mouth, Malfoy." Harry growled.

Draco continued, really enjoying himself. "We had a bit of fun. But, shhh...don't tell her I told you."

Things blinked away in his mind's eye: Angelina's terrible sullenness, her dirty hair and knees.

Harry reached up and was about to seize Draco by the hair but just then heard a soft meow of warning from somewhere behind him. He turned to see Mrs. Norris staring at them from her perch on the banister of the stairs, her eyes shining. Harry licked his lips, turned on

his heel, and ran down the stairs. He did not look back at Draco, for he knew there was no point—he would only see a red blur.

Chapter Seventeen: Trouble Finds a Way

Draco mentally kicked himself.

Why had he said that? He had narrowly escaped the situation unscathed, only to go and open his big mouth to Potter of all people? Still...his smile lingered, though his temples pulsed and he felt feverish with anticipation. His hands were also shaking slightly, as they had the night he watched her walk calmly away from him...

Potter was going to confront her. He did and he didn't like this idea. She wouldn't know what the hell he was talking about of course, but then again, what if his confrontation forced her memory to react? The spell didn't work that way...that Auror from his father's office still had no clue what happened that day, other than a routine raid that turned up nothing unusual or suspicious. Even though he had gotten a right good cane to the chest for witnessing that little encounter, Draco knew it had been worth it.

The look on Potter's face...yes it was worth the risk just to needle him good. So what if he had a silly row with his girlfriend because he was jealous? She wouldn't admit anything, and it would probably make him angrier, that temperamental Potter, wouldn't it? And perhaps they'd break up over it? That would be only too funny. And good...yes. Draco felt very good about causing trouble between them. And it wasn't just about Potter, either, he knew. It was Angelina. His mind became dark for a moment as he thought about what he had done, but very quickly he pushed it to the background again. The matter at hand: things were going his way. Umbridge had accepted his blackmail, he had Angelina's playbook, and now Potter was about to go and get himself dumped. Draco chuckled and began to saunter down the stairs as if he had all the time in the world, giving Mrs. Norris a casual salute as he went.

It was like poking a struggling insect with a stick.

There was really no other way to describe his state of mind as he caught up to her easily and walked along behind her silently for a step or two, immensely amused that she was so enveloped in her own world. She hadn't noticed or heard him coming at all. Her long,

dark hair was pulled up, but he thought he liked it better when it hung down her back. Her Quidditch boots were grinding the grass beneath them as she walked slowly with her head held at a funny angle, lost in thought.

Draco raised his eyebrow at her back as his lip curled up, but these gestures were only witnessed by the night sky above them.

“Out for an evening stroll, Johnson?”

She jumped and spun around, dropping her bag to the grass. He enjoyed the split second of instinctual fear that passed through her eyes and features just before she realized it was him and they became forbidding. “What the hell do you want?” Angelina hissed at him, reaching down to collect her bag.

He shrugged, his hands now in his pockets, and took a step in her direction.

“Daydreaming about your little Pottykins, were you?” he said spitefully, ignoring her question. She stood upright again and narrowed her eyes at him. He decided to poke a little more while he had the time...Crabbe and Goyle should’ve been over the gate by now, and well on their way down into the changing rooms...if the two clumsy oafs had managed it. “Or were you trying to think of ways to sack Weaselbee from your team without hurting his feelings? What a poor excuse for a Keeper...”

“You really want to talk about poor excuses, Malfoy?” she retorted sharply, “You couldn’t see a Snitch if it flew up your nose.”

Draco felt that hot pressure in his chest again—the kind he always got when someone insulted him. Shame he was so good at taking the mickey out of other people, but when the shoe was on the other foot he had still not quite mastered himself. Somehow or another being insulted by her made his chest tighten rather more than usual. This of course annoyed him—who the bloody hell was she?

“Watch your mouth, Johnson.”

"Grow up, you little dung beetle." She turned and was on the point of leaving him there as if she couldn't be bothered to waste another moment of her time on him. He would have let her go—he had other ways of getting back at her—but she stopped as if her mind had found something in the darkness and grabbed hold of it until revealing light could be shed. She turned back, her eyes probing. "What are you doing out here at this hour?" Her eyes grew wide with anger before he could properly retort and she marched back toward him. "Were you spying on us, Malfoy?"

She looked about ready to sock him in the mouth like her pathetic boyfriend had, but she didn't. She merely stood glaring at him expectantly, her chest rising and falling with tense anger. He laughed. "You think I need to spy on you to know Slytherin's got you Gryffindors pinned?"

"Slytherin hasn't got anything and knowing your sneaky little mind, yes..." She lifted her lip in disgust, which really got his goat, to see her looking at him as if she wanted to scrape him off her shoe like dog shit. "I should have known. I'm going to Umbridge."

She was turning around again, but his reaction was swift and without restraint.

He grabbed her by the arm and she cried out in surprise. Getting his hand over her mouth a split second later, Draco slammed her against a nearby tree. He slammed her so hard that her head bounced off the trunk and she squeezed her eyes shut, going limp for a moment before shaking herself out of the daze the blow induced. Angelina struggled commendably then, but she had underestimated Draco's strength. He did not often use it—he was not usually a hands-on person. He held her fast and firm to the spot. He laughed again as she shook her head furiously; her heated "Let me go!" stifled by his cold hand. Draco hadn't thought he would enjoy this so much--as fleeting and dangerous as it was. To have her thrashing about under him as he pinned her to the tree was extremely exciting. He felt a surge of power that rarely came for him over his enemies. Of course, in his conceited mind her being a girl automatically made her vulnerable to him, and he did not contemplate the source of his surprise show of might.

No, he didn't think about it much. His only instinct was to enjoy this...and Draco spoke to her with a hushed, malevolent voice, relishing the feel of her beneath him. There was such the shape and ripeness to her body that truthfully Draco had always rather admired. Angelina's body pushed and undulated against him, struggling...struggling...the fierce rage in her intense brown eyes...the angry glow of her smooth skin...the grunts of frustration vibrating in her throat and against the palm of his hand. Oh yes—this was fun.

"Watch yourself there, Johnson." Draco drawled. "I am a prefect, you know. I could take points if you aren't nice." He exhaled on her through his lips as he spoke. "Five points...ten points...you keep that up."

She said something that sounded like "go to hell" and kicked him hard in the shin. Damn those ostrich hide boots...they were made to last, and it hurt. She was off again fast, but he managed to allow the instant rage she had kindled overcome the pain in his bone and grabbed her by the fabric of her Quidditch robes, pulling her to the ground. The cloth tore, and she growled as he wrestled with her on the damp grass.

"Malfoy get—off—now!"

"Not until you apologize..." he said hoarsely, holding her wrists with all his strength as she thrashed about. Instead of apologizing, Angelina tried to get one of her knees under him in a particular angle. She jerked violently and he laughed at her. What followed was several seconds in which both of them struggled for the upper hand. She clawed at his hair and tried pushing him off every time he lost his grip on her wrists, but he always gained it back again and enjoyed restraining her. She let out a squeal of rage, wrenched a wrist out of his hold, and slapped him hard across the face.

"You blood-traitor bitch!" Draco's temper rose ferociously and he slapped her back. She looked shocked that he would, but quickly recovered, hissing at him that she would scream if he didn't let her up.

He should. He would. Her eyes were on fire, burning into him. An idea flickered dimly in his head, his lips dry again. She was breathing so hard her chest was slamming uncomfortably into his, the mounds of flesh that were her breasts caving slightly against his stiff frame. In the split second it took for his eyes to slide down to rest on her full, tender lips, the idea became much more than a flicker and he knew with certainty that his curiosity could no longer be denied. It was a curiosity that was creeping up his legs and into his stomach and flooding hot into his groin. There it gathered and there it pushed at him to act on his desire. The question of Angelina Johnson...he wanted it answered.

"Give us a kiss, first." He couldn't stop himself; it was almost surreal. He was leaning in, pressing himself against her, pushing her down into the damp earth. The hot pressure gave way to a full-blown erection and when she felt it, she gasped, which motivated his desire all the more. "Just one kiss..."

"You're cracked, get off me!" Angelina tried once again to land a blow to his balls, but as she was taller than him by at least an inch, her aim was too high and she got him in the abdomen instead of her intended target. He groaned and his grip loosened, giving her a chance to escape him. Sobering panic seized his mind and he remembered himself as he watched her get to her feet; he was sure she was going to run straight up to the castle and tell the first teacher she saw. She didn't do this. Instead she grabbed her bag and jammed her hand down into it, clawing at the contents rapidly. Draco realized what she was going for and his wand was out of the folds of his robes and being aimed just as she had found hers. She jabbed her shaking hand at him and opened her mouth.

"Impediment--!"

"EXPELLIARMUS!"

Her wand flew out of her hand and landed between them. She dove for it, but he was too quick. Draco grabbed it up and aimed it at her. She glared at him, her chest heaving, her hair disheveled and coming out of her ponytail. "That wasn't very nice, Johnson," he breathed almost whimsically despite the knot of panic developing in his throat.

"Touch me again and I'll break your fingers!"

Draco saw lights flickering up ahead; people were moving about in the castle. Had someone heard them? Was someone coming? He felt cold dread creeping up on him. What had he done? What was he doing? She was going to blab to anyone who would listen. Umbridge wouldn't believe her, though, would she? No way...but he couldn't take that chance. Umbridge might not care about a stupid playbook, but assaulting a fellow student the way he just had...if his father found out he would be punished severely.

"You tried to...to..." Angelina was sputtering out, now, her eyes shrinking at him with disgust. Draco did not like the way she was looking at him. He had to think, quickly. He could see it now...McGonagall's nostril's flaring, bull-like, and her eyes widening with explosive rage as she screamed: "HE TRIED TO WHAT?"

He remembered a while back. The raids of wizards' homes for dark artifacts. His father's study...the Auror who had come to inspect them. Lucius had not been aware that Draco was standing in the hall, watching everything through the open doorway...

There was nothing for it.

"O-Obliviate!"

Angelina's expression of shock melted from her face, replaced by such abnormal sereness that it unnerved Draco. Her shoulders relaxed and she stared at him blankly, her hands falling to her sides as she stood there before him—inanimate and vulnerable. He blinked at her, still a bit panicked by his own actions and the situation he was now facing. He licked his dry lips. What had his father done? Simply spoken to the man...

"Johnson?" She blinked. "Angelina."

"What?" her voice was just as hollow as her expression.

"Are you paying attention?"

“Yes...”

He didn’t have much time to modify her memory. She would wake from the spell and find him there, not knowing how they ended up in this predicament, and then he’d have to do it all over again. “Listen to me. You’re going back up from practice. You’re tired, and you want to take a shower and go to sleep.”

“Right. Tired.”

“Get your things.” She obediently reached down and grabbed her bag from the grass. He hesitated, but held out her wand to her and she took it. Angelina turned and walked away. “Oi, Johnson, wait.” She stopped and turned. That damned look in her eyes was making his skin crawl. He hadn’t been able to see the man’s face when his father did it, but now he understood why only wizards who were of age and who could handle it (and for that matter, certified in some capacity – Healers and Ministry officials and such) were allowed to use this spell. It was tricky and very dangerous business, tampering with people’s memories.

“What?”

“You didn’t see me, understand? You took your time going back so you could think about how pathetic your team is, but you didn’t see anyone else along the way.” She inclined her head in something resembling a nod and turned to walk away again. Draco had a thought, could not help himself, and with a slight smile called her back again. The spell turned her around for a second time.

“Yes?”

“I think you were thinking that when Potter touches you it feels a bit like being rubbed by a slimy sausage.”

The muscle under her eye twitched, and he thought that he had gone too far—the spell had worn off and she was going to slap him again and go screaming to McGonagall. But...she merely turned yet again to make her way up the path toward the castle.

He watched her go, feeling like he had just narrowly escaped the gallows.

Draco lifted his hand to his smarting cheek, rubbing the spot where she had slapped him gently with his fingers. He reached up also with trembling hands and smoothed his hair down again. He heard lumbering, dragging footsteps behind him and knew that Crabbe and Goyle were approaching.

He turned. Sure enough, they were shuffling their heavy bodies up the path towards him. Goyle looked flustered and was breathing as if he'd been jogging laps around the pitch. Crabbe was clutching the playbook in a hand that gripped Goyle's shoulder; his other hand was covering his eyes. Draco frowned at them, trying to ignore the painful throbbing in his shin.

"What happened to you, Crabbe?"

"She jinxed her stupid locker. Got me right in the eyes when I tried to open it..."

Draco smiled. "Let's have a look, then." Reluctantly, Crabbe lowered his hand. His eyes were crossed so badly that they looked like one single pupil in the center, joined at the very top of the bridge of his nose. Draco snorted and shook his head, reaching out for the book. "Got to hand it to her..."

Crabbe gave him the book and hastily covered his eyes again. "What do I do about this?"

"Go to the hospital wing, what do I care?"

"But what if Pomfrey asks how it happened?" Goyle put in, showing an unusual hint of shrewdness.

"Just tell her you're stupid. She'll believe you." Tucking the book into the folds of his robes, he nodded them off. They went and he turned to go in the opposite direction. Angelina had already disappeared through the front entrance. He could not wait to get up to his room

and catch up on his reading...and of course, reliving the feel of her body underneath his over and over again was on the agenda as well...

Harry's temper...

Yes that was a well-worn subject by now. People thought it clouded his judgment. It only got him into trouble, they said; only hurt him in the long run. Both his quick, flame-like anger and his passionate stubbornness were things no one really understood. Hermione, Ron, even Dumbledore ...none of them could seem to grasp that his passion (and even his anger, yes) fueled his survival. Harry couldn't articulate this: not to them and not to himself either, but it was a certainty – just as surely as it was that he needed to talk to Angelina now.

And as for the trouble...well they told him that he could more easily avoid trouble if he kept his temper in check. Rubbish. Trouble always found a way.

Harry descended upon the Great Hall like an owl delivering an urgent message, his eyes searching out the person he had come for. He ignored the chattering, laughing crowd of students all around him. He ignored Cho's gaze, ignored the staff table where Umbridge was now squeezing her plump bottom into her usual seat, and completely disregarded Hermione and Ginny. His sole purpose was to get to Angelina...there she was, picking at her food whilst Fred and George talked amongst themselves, occasionally forcing a laugh at something they said.

Harry stopped short where she sat, breathing hard and sweating a little but not really noticing as he nearly shouted: "I need to talk to you. Now."

She looked up at him, her eyes widening with surprise. "Harry, what's the matter?"

"Can we get out of here?"

He didn't wait for her to answer him. Almost blindly he reached down and took hold of her arm, guiding her up from the bench. Her spoon clattered to the tabletop as she stumbled before Harry turned to lead her back out the way he had come. Many pairs of eyes watched them; some of the laughter and chatter died away as the two of them walked in silence through their midst. Harry was tingling all over, that familiar white noise in his ears and vision again as he led Angelina out of the Great Hall and into a small corridor behind the stairs. The corridor led to the stairs that would take them down to the Slytherin common room and the kitchens. He stopped with her there, the two of them looking at each other in tense silence before he could gather the calm to speak.

"I've just come from a row with Malfoy," he began, licking his lips again. They were dry and his stomach felt hollow but queasy. He just needed to breathe. Harry did this, the air streaming out of his nostrils warmly and disturbing her hair. He hadn't realized he was standing so close to her. She waited for him to continue. Her eyes were fixed and blank. "He said—Angelina, he said some stuff..."

"What did he say?" Her voice was diminutive, unlike the voice she normally used to speak to him. Harry thought with no small amount of unpleasantness that she sounded like Cho.

"Stuff about the two of you having...having 'fun'. That he...knows why I like you, now...t-that you..."

Harry had to stop. His young mind was finding it very difficult to grasp Draco's words at the same time that it produced images of things Harry had seen that would confirm them. Dirty hair. Red palm. Tear in her robes...

"Well what was he talking about?" Angelina stared at him intently.

"Did he...? Angelina you would tell me if he...?"

"What?"

"Put his hands on you. F-forced you to do something..." He was finding it difficult to speak.

Her eyes grew wide with shock and disgust. "You think he forced himself on me? Like..." Angelina lowered her voice, "...like rape?"

Harry shuddered upon hearing that word. It had indeed been what he was thinking; even if he didn't choose to let the word materialize in his fifteen-year-old head. "He didn't." His voice was a grave whisper. This was not a question. If Malfoy had...Merlin help him.

"No!"

"And you'd tell me if he had?"

"Bloody hell, Harry, have you cracked completely? What did that little toerag say to you?"

"He-he said..." Harry was beginning to feel his anger mutate into a kind of two-headed 'I-can't-believe-I-fell-for-it-but-he-sounded-so-smug-and-convincing' beast. "He implied that..."

"Well he was obviously lying." Her voice had taken on that tone again, only this time Harry did not like it at all. "Goodness, he's running 'round like mad to get you to react to him, and you don't seem to be getting any better at calling his bluff—Harry!"

For Harry had turned and was now striding back out into the foyer, his feet carrying him almost of their own will towards the Great Hall again. He didn't know what he was going to do, but just then all he wanted was Draco. Was he sitting now among his smug friends at the Slytherin table, boasting to them about putting his hands on Harry's girlfriend?

Harry's feet were carrying him closer, he was almost at the threshold, but Angelina seized him and pulled him back roughly, much as she had done in his dream. She had to struggle hard to get him to come back with her, but when she finally managed it they were standing in the little corridor again, breathing loudly at each other, their eyes locked.

"I'm sorry I said that, but Harry you have to leave it alone," she said, her own temper flaring. "What did you say to him to make him tell you that?"

"What?" Harry couldn't believe his ears. "Are you...? You are not defending him!"

"No, I am not." Angelina closed her eyes and tried to steady herself. He watched her, his temples pulsing with anger. "But Harry, you have to get a grip on yourself." She groaned. "I knew this would happen..."

"You knew what would happen? That I would kill him? Well, you were damned right!" Her eyes were still closed to him, though she gave a slight twinge when he yelled at her. Harry stopped and looked about, his eyes searching for those phantom helpers again as they had back when Ron was telling him about his crush on Hermione. "What do you want me to do, then? Just act like he didn't say those things?"

"Well..." Angelina looked at him finally. "It was a really disgusting thing to do, but..."

Harry blinked. "But...?"

"Listen: it was just like the practice drill. He was just being Malfoy."

"Angelina, you're not telling me that his basically bragging about having his way with you was anything like--"

"No, but I'm saying he was lying to get this—us bickering like this—to happen."

He shook his head at her, still not seeing anything her way and determined to flush out the rat. "B-But what was wrong with you that night? Angelina, you were acting strange."

"What?"

"Last Tuesday you were all dirty and your robes were torn!" Harry snapped impatiently, his skin growing hot all over. "And you—you barely let me touch you."

"Harry, that...that was...I was just..." Her head shivered back and forth slightly like she was shaking it to clear it and her eyes became unfocused as though she were trying to remember exactly what he was talking about. "I-I don't know, but it had nothing to do with Malfoy. I told you already, we were practicing hard. I got roughed up a bit at practice, maybe..."

"Maybe?"

"It doesn't matter!"

"Damn it, Angelina!" He stamped his foot. He was confused and angry.

"Would you look at yourself? You're acting like--"

"Don't say it." She stopped and looked at him with solemn eyes. He sighed as he realized that arguing with her was getting him nowhere. "Fine. We'll pretend that he didn't just tell me he felt you up then. I'll just grin and bear it like a chump and everyone will be happy..." He said this in a defeated manner, but in reality he was far from it. Even if nothing happened (he had no reason to suspect she would lie to him), Draco was still gonna get it. Harry didn't know how yet...oh but it was coming.

To his utter irritation, she laughed quite abruptly. He scowled at her and she clapped her hand over her mouth, shaking her head in apology as more muffled giggles escaped her.

"What?" He snapped, quite incensed.

She sighed and removed her hand from her mouth, her eyes full of fondness. "It's just...soo cute how you leap to my rescue like that. And we've only been dating for a week."

Harry narrowed his eyes at her dubiously, crossing his arms. "Angelina, be serious."

"I am." And the smile faded from her lips. She stepped closer to him and sighed. "I've been really stressed out and feeling a little...off for the past few days. You've been really patient. I appreciate that."

"Yeah, well..." He looked away from her stubbornly, still fancying the idea of wringing Malfoy's neck. Or a good exploding-puss-polyps hex would do that sneaky git right. He fancied he'd ask Fred or George for advice on the best method for getting Malfoy to cry. Yes...Harry fancied he wanted to see the blond rat cry a bit. Angelina spoke, pulling him from his dark thoughts.

"Malfoy is scum. We know it. He'll continue to be. But Harry I just don't want you to get into trouble again."

"The things he said, though." He turned back to her, looking into her eyes, suddenly determined to make her understand how scared he'd been. She seemed to be lost in this gaze for a moment, her own eyes shining with something he couldn't read. He was scared he'd uncovered something in that look, but she merely nodded.

"I understand."

Harry reached out suddenly and pulled her into his arms. Her warm body melted against his and he closed his eyes to relish the feeling. The thought of Draco putting his slimy hands on her filled him with cold, hard rage. Coupled with that, though, was another more powerful emotion. He did not recognize this emotion right away. Growing up with virtually no trace of the thing had deprived him of the ability to determine its presence easily. It wasn't yet as strong as how he felt about his parents...but it was glinting at him from some place deep within him, making him hold her still tighter for a moment.

He suddenly remembered something and released her. "He was talking to Umbridge."

She frowned. "What?"

"Before I ran into him and he said that stuff about you I overheard him and Umbridge talking. They were planning something. He's got something on her." He pushed the nasty business he had just

confronted her about aside and began rattling off everything he'd heard.

"Harry, slow down, you're stammering."

"Sorry," Harry stood from his leaning position against the stone wall and grabbed her hand, leading her back out into the entrance hall and towards the sounds of laughter and talking. "Come on, I wanna talk to Hermione. You'll get the details while I'm talking to her."

Harry forced himself to let what Malfoy had said alone, for the moment. Soon enough though, he would regret it; Harry would make sure of that.

He did not know, however, that Angelina was thinking—thinking hard—as he lead her quickly back to the Gryffindor table to join Hermione. What he told her made something click in her mind. Her mood the last few days had been the result of all that stress she had mentioned, true, but more so than that she had been struggling with the overpowering feeling that there was something wrong with her. Something had happened to her and she could not catch hold of the memory with witch to light the dark room she'd found herself standing in when she looked down at her bruised wrists and knees in the shower Tuesday night.

She was frightened, but she could not let Harry know. What...what was that empty hole that kept reappearing every time she tried to remember what she had been doing that would cause her wrists to bruise? The thought of Draco's tale filled her with wretchedness beyond revulsion. She made the plan to do a little confronting herself, as this boy she loved to kiss led her to his bushy-haired friend. She didn't know that Harry was planning a version of the same thing.

Oh how trouble finds a way.

Chapter Eighteen: Boys Will Be Boys Part One: Affection

Weeks passed, and Harry looked up to find that all of a sudden it was threatening snowfall.

It was now mid-November. The chill in the air had steadily progressed to deep, scathing cold and the sky had become gray and cloudless. The brittle cold was spreading to the foliage and the trees had lost all their leaves in the blink of an eye, bringing the draft of winter to Hogwarts' doorstep. During the progression of these days and nights many things happened. They'd had more D.A. meetings, and the next Quidditch match for Gryffindor was coming up; this one against Hufflepuff.

Angelina had thrown herself into Quidditch; scheduling practices for the team as often as she could. She was determined to work with them and gain improvement before the Hufflepuff match. If they won, they could take a break while Ravenclaw took on Slytherin and play the winner after Christmas break. She had plunged ahead and created a new playbook, salvaging what she could remember from her old one and even adding stuff she hadn't yet perfected before it was stolen. Though Montague, the Slytherin captain, feigned ignorance of any stolen plays, his team strutted about with a smug air of confidence that belied his denials. Harry knew that if he should ever wish to sneak up on them while they were practicing, he would see them implementing Angelina's moves with their own, but she insisted that she wouldn't let it get her down. Instead of dwelling on it, she came up with some excellent new material, with some help from Fred and George, and even Ginny, who was proving to be quite the little strategist.

The youngest Weasley sibling confessed that she'd been into Quidditch since she was little, and had learned to ride a broom by stealing her brothers' and teaching herself. Harry, along with her brothers and Angelina, was impressed. The interesting spin she put on the Sloth Grip Roll, for example, was really genius. Dean and Kirk had told him excitedly one night about how Ginny made Dean think the Snitch was zooming off somewhere above her head, when really it was just bellow her. "And when I caught up and was about to knock her out of the way, she rolled upside down and got it before I even

realized what was going on!" Dean gushed, totally in awe. "Harry, mate, she's giving you a run for your money, she is!"

He only wished he could still be a part of the team; to feel the excitement that the others felt when making progress with the improved new techniques. Ginny promised to show him the move when he was back on the team, dismissing any negative remarks from him on the subject. "Once Umbridge is gone, you're back," she said rather confidently. "And I think I might fancy being a Chaser anyway. Seeker is ok, but I prefer scoring points to going blind looking for that annoying little ball."

Ron was dedicating himself just as much, if not more. Not being able to solve his problem with Hermione and refusing to make the first move had led him to submerge himself in the game. He disappeared from their midst, along with Ginny, on early weekend mornings and did not return until the evening; usually sweaty, dog-tired, and quiet. He would eat, drink, and only grunted his answers to questions that Harry asked about how practice was going. Angelina usually reserved the pitch for practice drills after breakfast on those weekends, which meant that Ron and Dean were up and gone before Harry even opened his eyes.

Today Harry was in the library, catching up on mountains of homework with Hermione while Ron and Ginny were off killing themselves at practice.

Fred and George finally came to him as they promised they would. Hermione was in the stacks, looking for some books she needed, and he was watching the gray sky through the large windows. Fred shoved his beaming face into Harry's field of vision by bending over sideways, his eyebrows wiggling up and down with whimsical mischief.

"All done, mate!" he whispered happily, standing up straight and walking around to take Hermione's seat across from Harry.

George had already situated himself by pulling up a seat from a nearby table; causing the three first years sitting there to groan quietly and look about for Madame Pince, as one of them now had

nowhere to sit. Harry looked from one to the other expectantly, sitting up straight in his chair. "What's all done?" he whispered, his eyebrows rising.

The twins exchanged looks of satisfaction and George told Harry, "They're only prototypes, mind, you..."

Fred continued: "But, we figured it was time to test them out."

"And what better subject...?"

"...than our sneaky little lab rat, Malfoy?"

Harry forgave them their routine of finishing each other's sentences and adopted his own wayward grin, his insides tingling with eagerness. He was quite keen to hear what the boys had in mind, and he hoped that Hermione would take a little longer finding her books. He glanced around, his eyes scanning the area for Pince or Granger, neither of whom he saw any sign of. Pince must've been patrolling the stacks, looking for kids putting books in the wrong places or abusing the pages by thumbing through. Hermione was probably taking time to probe books she found with interesting titles while on her search for the texts she needed for her Ancient Runes essay. He turned back to the twins, nodding at them to have out with it.

"Well, let's just say when we're finished with him it'll be a while before he can show his face around school again," Fred said, leaning back in Hermione's chair so he was balancing it on two legs.

"And we mean that quite literally, of course," George added.

"Excellent!"

Yes, many things had happened during those days and nights that marked winter's steady descent upon them.

The most significant occurrence for Harry, aside from his plan with the twins for revenge on Malfoy, had happened the night of the Slytherin match. That night he had gone to bed with his mind buzzing

stubbornly. For starters, he could not shake the feeling that Angelina was a bit more upset about what he told her than she let on. She had barely been paying attention while he, Hermione and Ginny discussed Malfoy's conversation with Umbridge. She merely gave Harry's hand a squeeze when they sat down, and he rightly took this gesture to mean that she did not want him telling anyone else about what they'd argued over in the corridor. He could respect this. He didn't fancy the idea of anyone else knowing either.

Hermione, however, was quite rapt with the story.

"And you're positive?" she asked him when he'd finished. "You actually heard him say he knew we were up to something?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, and you were right about Umbridge--someone did tell her about our meeting at the Hog's Head because she said she knew it, too. That decree was definitely because of us."

Hermione sat thinking for a moment. When she piped up again, she was shaking her head, which gave Harry the impression she was dismissing his concern. "He was bluffing..."

"What do you mean?" Harry frowned at her.

"I mean I don't think he's got a clue what we're up to." Before he could speak she leaned in closer to him, along with Ginny and Angelina, and proceeded to explain herself in a hushed whisper. "Think about it: if he did know what we were doing, he would have just turned us in, instead of asking her to let him help her. He just wants Umbridge in his corner."

"But, why? He hates teachers. And furthermore, Umbridge may be mean and completely mad, but she's not stupid. She wouldn't just give him whatever he wants, unless..."

It was Ginny who spoke next. "Unless that thing he said he had over her was something really bad." Harry looked at her and nodded. "And if it involves his father, it's probably something dark and not very suitable for someone who works under the Minister."

"Yeah...he did say that if the Minister found out about it, she'd be in big trouble."

"So we know she's going to give Malfoy what he wants just to shut him up and keep him happy." Hermione agreed. "I suspect that's really all he's aiming for. I mean, think about it Harry: if you were as terrible as Malfoy and wanted to be able to bully people all day long without getting into trouble for it, wouldn't you make a deal like that?"

Harry had to admit, that yes, he would probably. That would be, of course, if he thought the way people like Draco Malfoy did, or needed to bully people at all to make himself feel like some big man. He didn't. Still...there was just something off about it. He couldn't put his finger on it, but he knew that it couldn't be that simple. Harry realized that he was very hungry and had still not eaten. He also noticed that he was still clutching Angelina's hand. He looked over at her and saw that she was deep in thought. At first he figured that she was merely going over what they were talking about in her head, but as he released her hand she looked up at him as if this action had only just brought her to the present. Harry frowned.

"You okay?"

"Uh huh..." she smiled faintly at him.

He did not believe her. This stirred the dark feelings he was having about Malfoy's boast at the top of those stairs again. Harry reached over and quickly filled his plate, not wishing to ask her again in front of Ginny or Hermione. Dessert was all that was left because he'd missed the main course, so Harry started on a thick slice of chocolate pie and began guessing with Ginny and Hermione what exactly Draco had on Umbridge. He also found, according to Angelina, that his suspicions about how Umbridge found out about the playbook had been right. She explained that McGonagall had come to speak with her in the changing rooms after the game, having noticed quite clearly that Montague was mimicking her every move almost as if he knew what she was going to do before she did it.

"It was kind of horrible, really," Angelina told them. "I felt so bad, and she was furious."

"Not at you?" Harry asked through a mouthful of pie, his eyes narrowing with disbelief.

"No, at Slytherin. She was going to go and find Snape, but he was with you I expect, so Umbridge butted in."

"Of course she did..." Harry shook his head at his plate, knowing full well that eating so much pie would make him sick later on, but his empty stomach would not have him denying it food.

Hermione made a face at him as he shoved more pie into his mouth before turning her attention back to Angelina. "I heard there was a fantastic row. People said they heard the two of them yelling at each other in the tunnel to the changing rooms while we were filing out."

Angelina confirmed this. "Yeah, the whole team was there. McGonagall demanded that we search the Slytherin lockers but Umbridge said something about it being a violation of student privacy--"

"What a load of shite!" Ginny muttered bitterly. Hermione shot her a disapproving look, which she ignored, and Harry raised his eyebrows at her. This girl continued to surprise and impress him every day. "I wanted to hex her so badly! She knows she doesn't respect students' privacy! She just wanted to be a bitch to Professor McGonagall for disagreeing with that decree!"

Harry looked up at the staff table. Dumbledore was missing again, which displeased him—he was still waiting for those "answers" he was promised. McGonagall was eating in silence, her eyes narrowed and her lips tight. He looked over at Snape, who also looked angry, though Harry wondered with whom. "What d'you reckon Snape said when he found this out?"

Hermione shrugged. "He doesn't seem to like Umbridge very much, but he's probably furious that McGonagall tried to search his team's lockers." When dinner was over and the plates were wiped away, he hurriedly gulped down some cold milk before it vanished, too. "We've got to be extra careful with the D.A. now, just in case..." Hermione

said as they made their way back up to the common room. "If Umbridge gives Malfoy and his twin twits whatever special authority, they'll use it to sniff us out."

"We should have another meeting as soon as possible to talk about options," Harry said darkly, looking at Angelina sideways. Her eyes were unfocused again, and she was staring at the back of some girl's head as they walked, her grip on his hand very loose.

Hermione must have noticed this as well, because she leaned closer and whispered in his ear: "What did you pull her out of dinner for, Harry? Did you two have a row?" Harry turned his gaze away from Angelina and nodded. "What about?" was her next question.

"Nothing...just..." he hesitated, "nothing important."

"But it's okay, now, right?" Hermione pressed. He shrugged, truthfully. They reached the common room and Angelina announced she was going to bed early, citing her weariness from the game as her excuse. She gave Harry a soft kiss on the lips and carried herself upstairs and away from him. Both Hermione and Ginny echoed this feeling. He sighed. When he was about to part ways with the girls, Hermione took hold of him and gave him a hug.

"I'm sorry you and Angelina argued, Harry, but don't feel bad." She offered him an embarrassed, tragically depressed smile. "Ronald kissed me earlier today and instead of kissing him back like I wanted to, I ran away..."

Harry couldn't think of a response and she turned to walk up to her dorm with Ginny in tow. Harry sighed and sat down in a chair by a window. He felt completely numb. He could only think to himself vaguely: boy the first two months of school are usually crazy, but this year takes the cake. He sat there for a while, vaguely aware of Fred and George doing their now almost nightly routine of dazzling crowds of young Gryffindors with their latest inventions. Tonight it was chews that would make the eater's nose gush out streams of blood. They had finally perfected the chews that would stop the bleeding. Applause and the occasional clink of Knuts, Sickles and Galleons could be heard.

He wanted to see Malfoy pay for what he said.

Harry stared at the night sky, thinking of Angelina and how much he wished she would just tell him what was making her so distant. The match was over; why was she still acting that way? Was it him, then? He supposed that arguing with her over Malfoy's pettiness had not helped much. Yelling at her was certainly not the way to relieve her of her sullenness. He groaned inwardly at himself. Was she regretting getting started with him because he was so hotheaded? This had been Hermione's label for him once, and at the time it only made Harry angry but now he realized that ironically enough that just proved her point even more.

Harry remembered something that his Aunt Petunia always said when Dudley was acting particularly evil. "Boys will be boys!" she crooned to her little Dudders, and it had always made Harry's blood boil to have his cousin's atrocious behavior brushed off by something as silly as that. But, then no....

A lot of people in the Wizarding World thought Muggles uncivilized and unsophisticated. Malfoy didn't resort to physical violence because his father taught him that proper wizards used wands and that was all there was to it. Yes...but they were boys. Wizards or no, they were boys—the lot of them, Harry, Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Ronald, Fred, and George...they were rough, rude, joking, scratching, cursing, jealous boys. Weren't they? And didn't boys have their own instincts, their own way of doing things, whether with a wand or their bare hands? What made Malfoy taunt Harry by saying terrible things about his girlfriend? What made Harry try to pound him into the pitch when he insulted his parents? That same carnality that all boys had – both magic folk and Muggles alike.

There was no way he could take it lying down.

Fred and George were on their way up to bed when Harry jumped to his feet and caught them.

"Hey, guys, wait."

"What's up, Harry? Care to purchase one for yourself?" George dangled a chew in his face.

Harry shook his head and beckoned them closer, lowering his voice even though they were pretty much the last ones left in the common room. "No...I need your help with something."

"With what, lad?" Fred asked, frowning, though he seemed quite keen to hear. Harry told them an abridged version of events—saying only that Malfoy had insulted Angelina and that it was time for some payback. "We've been saying all along we should have dunked that sod head-first into the toilets for stealing Angie's playbook."

George nodded his agreement. "You should've seen us at the match. It was all Granger could do to keep us from pelting him and that ugly beast Montague with the Stinksap bombs we'd brought."

"So you'll help, then? Only you can't tell Angelina," said Harry anxiously. It wasn't like him to be planning the blatant harassment of a fellow student, but despite whatever pang of conscience he was experiencing, he felt almost giddy with satisfaction. The twins echoed this sentiment, and the three of them sat talking for a while longer.

"We've got some good Homemade Hexes we've been working on," George had confided in Harry as the embers from the once huge fire crackled softly. "Fred and me have been testing them out on ourselves, with disastrous results, mind you, for a couple of years now."

"But I reckon it's time for us to get a new guinea pig, eh, Harry?" Fred smiled evilly.

"When do you want to do it, then?" Harry asked without hesitation. The twins thought for a moment.

"We'll need a week or two..." said Fred.

Harry frowned, slightly disappointed. "Why?"

"There's something we'll need, and we have to put the finishing touches on it. We've been wanting to try this out for a while."

They didn't elaborate on what exactly they were planning to use on Malfoy, but Harry suspected that whatever it was, it was going to be good. As for himself, he mostly just wanted to participate. The twins were the experts, and if he could only see Malfoy get what he deserved it would be enough. Of course...he did feel a little guilty. Simply because he knew that neither Hermione nor Angelina would thank him for doing something so petty. Angelina's disapproval of him, he realized, was almost worse than Hermione's. Where Hermione scolded him mercilessly to the point of extreme irritation, Angelina's reproach of his less honorable actions came with cut-and-dry simplicity that made him feel like a brat. It was so hard to take sometimes.

The twins did not make fun of him for not wanting to let Angelina know about what they were doing.

"Sometimes she's worse than Granger," Fred admitted, voicing Harry's very feelings on the matter. "But they just don't understand, Harry. A wizard's gotta do what a wizard's gotta do, eh?" Harry fancied Fred's sly wink had sealed their friendship. He had always been rather amused by and in awe of the twins, but now it seemed they had finally found the means to bond. Funny it was Malfoy's humiliation that did such.

Saying goodnight and parting ways with the boys, Harry carried himself tiredly into his dorm.

He felt a poke of guilt when he saw Ron asleep on his bed, still wearing his Quidditch gear; his head was still pressed into that pillow. Harry shuffled over to his friend and gently shook him. "Hey, Ron..." he whispered.

Ronald's lanky body gave a violent twitch and he rolled over onto his back, his mouth wide open. He snored loudly at Harry in response. Harry tried again, poking Ron in the shoulder.

"Hey, wake up, you git. You're not gonna sleep in your Quidditch things, are you?"

"Nah..." said Ron, still sound asleep. He did not move, but his mouth hung open even wider and Harry stifled an amused snort at the thin line of drool that was making its way slowly down the boy's chin. "Lemme alone, Hermione..." he mumbled. Harry did laugh quietly at this. Sighing, he walked around and gently removed Ron's Quidditch boots, stowing them beside his trunk. He then began to undress himself, pulling off his shirt and jeans before slipping into his pajama bottoms and climbing into bed.

He took off his glasses and lay down.

It took him a long time to fall asleep. He was thinking of the ways in which he could cause Malfoy to retract his nasty lies about Angelina...he was thinking of Quidditch...he missed it so much and he had only been banned for a week. He thought of Ron and Hermione. They liked each other but were too stubborn to admit it. He couldn't wait for them to figure out whatever it was they needed to so he wouldn't have to be stuck in the middle of their bickering anymore. He knew he was falling asleep when he thought nonsensically: we could double-date on the next Hogsmeade trip...get some hot chocolate...and maybe Hermione and Angelina could play with each other's hair...yeah...

He fell into black unconsciousness and touched down in the corridor of torches.

The doors floated past him in a blur as he sped toward his target—the one door at the end with the promising light shimmering at him from underneath it. Harry lifted his hand, his fingers groping, his heart pounding. It seemed to be taking him forever. He hissed in his sleep. He was almost there...Ron snored loudly and Harry awoke to find himself lying in bed with his arm extended upwards.

He sighed miserably. If only Ron had held his snore a few seconds more...

Harry was very hot for some reason. It must've been the vividness of the dream that caused his heart to pound and his head to ache with anticipation. He threw his covers off of himself and swung his legs around. He needed to find his wand. He was thirsty.

All of his roommates were snoring softly; Neville muttering in his sleep, Seamus with his eyes buried in the crook of his arm. Dean had his curtains drawn. Harry found his wand tucked into his back jeans pocket and conjured a glass of cool water. He drank, sitting on the edge of his bed, listening to Neville's faint mutterings and thinking hard about his dream. Was he ever going to reach that door? Was he ever going to open it and see what was inside? And he could not shake the feeling that this corridor existed some place...but where he couldn't guess. It was all very maddening.

There was a faint creak in the floorboards and Harry looked up to see Angelina standing in the doorway.

The dim moonlight only half-illuminated her tall, slender form, but what little light there was rested on her rather ethereally. He sat there for a moment wondering if he was still dreaming. She stood perfectly still during this time, one hand resting on the doorframe and the other hanging loose at her side. She was wearing a sheer white nightgown...watching him watching her. Harry's pulse began to accelerate and the perspiring glass of water he was holding slipped a little in his grip.

"May I come in?" she whispered. He nodded silently and she tiptoed in, closing the door slowly behind her. He watched her weave around the beds and furnace carefully to get to him, taking a pause to raise a disapproving eyebrow at Ron's sleeping in his dirty clothes. When she stood next to him finally, he looked up at her from his sitting position and saw that the moonlight had at last reached her face. She looked very tired, but sweet...so sweet in the pale moonlight wearing that very feminine nightgown, as opposed to the tee shirt and shorts he'd seen her in before. "I had a bad dream..." she explained softly; simply.

Harry found his voice, though his chest was being attacked by his beating heart. "Me too."

The nightgown only came to her knees, where it rustled a bit when being disturbed by his breath. She was very close to him, he realized as he watched the fabric ripple when he exhaled. One of her legs moved and her knee came up slightly, touching the glass still sitting loosely in his hand.

"Do you want some water?"

He was vaguely aware that he had four roommates who could wake at any moment and discover her in their midst, but there was a fine veil of something surrounding the two of them that made it impossible to focus on anything but her lips as she lifted his glass and drank. Her throat moved gracefully as she swallowed...he remained silent until she was finished.

"Thanks..." she set the glass on his nightstand. Harry had been watching the perspiration on its surface run down to the base when he felt her fingers slide into his hair. "Harry can I stay here with you for a little while?"

So all those times she had spoken to him that way, making him feel like such the kid...her tone this time made up for them. She spoke to him now as a girl would her protector, her fingers in his hair causing him to sway to the familiar lull of sleep. He nodded. "Yeah, come on..."

He stood up for her and she let her hand fall away from his hair, smiling at him almost shyly as he allowed her to slide into his bed. He caught the outline of her body through the sheer fabric of the nightgown just before a cloud passed over the moon. The arch of her back and sleek curve of her breasts made his temples pulse with that something.

Harry hesitated before getting in himself. He had never, ever had a girl in his bed before. Seamus' bed, sure, but not his own. And not...like this.

Her body was warm and lithe. She instantly moved closer to him when he was under the covers, resting her arm on his bare chest and burying her face in his neck. She traced her fingers along the jagged scar he'd received from the Hungarian Horntail's horned tail and sighed softly. Harry turned his face so that his mouth was very close to her cheek. "Were you scared?"

She nodded, their skin touching for a millisecond. "Yeah, I was pretty shaken up. You?"

"No, not scared. Disappointed." Perhaps it was that it was the middle of the night and he was still very sleepy, but for some reason he forgot any awkwardness or uncertainty. Nuzzling his mouth against her cheek seemed a perfectly natural thing to do. She pressed herself even closer to him. "Congratulations, by the way."

He felt her frown. "For what?"

"Winning the match."

"Oh, that." Angelina yawned and lifted her shoulders into a shrug. "Just barely. If Ginny hadn't managed to get hold of that Snitch..."

Harry chuckled to himself, the sleepy absurdity of his thoughts creeping up on him again. "Luna Lovegood wore a lion for a hat."

Angelina's body shook with soft laughter. "I know. Damned thing kept roaring at us during the match. Poor Ron didn't know what to do with himself between that and that horrible song those Slytherins were screaming."

His eyes closed and he made himself comfortable, reaching under her warm body to pull her still closer. The lazy hold of arousal was upon him, though he scarcely paid wakeful attention to what this was or meant. He simply followed his instinct to slide his nose and mouth along her cheek until they met the tiny corner where her earlobe touched and he kissed her there. Somewhere in the dark Neville muttered that he might just get a new pet if Trevor didn't want to stick around anymore. Angelina was laughing again but Harry captured her mouth suddenly and she hushed.

He woke up and she did too. They gazed at each other with identical, kinetic desire. The boys were all asleep. Eyes still locked together, Harry and Angelina exchanged several tender kisses—lips pressing and peeling with mounting intensity as they both began to touch on purposeful movement. Harry let the breath he'd been unaware he was holding out through his nostrils and turned to face her fully, pulling her tightly against him. His hands roamed new territory; her body was almost completely exposed to his touch through the nightgown.

Their legs entwined...Harry hesitated for a split second, recognizing finally what 'something' he was feeling. He wanted to feel her hands on him, but as she closed the space between them, he felt himself filling with fear and uncertainty. Despite his effort to ignore it, it lay there underneath his desire for her.

Physical affection. He had not been exposed to it much growing up. Indeed no. When he was touched at all it was usually out of anger or as a dismissive gesture. He had been pushed into the tiny broom cupboard, led around by his tender ear, shoved to the ground by his cousin's heavy hands, etc. His aunt Petunia cut his hair, usually wearing bright yellow scrubbing gloves when she did this, yanking his head all around as roughly as she pleased. Vernon shoved him out of the way and slapped him upside the back of his head roughly. These kinds of things were merely routine in the Dursley household—when Harry was very little he tried his best to make them like him; make them love him or at least want him there. But as he grew older, he stopped trying to please them and resentment began to develop inside. He woke up in the morning, every morning, bracing himself for a violation of his physical space and he stayed like that all day until he closed his eyes at night.

No, there had been no physical affection for Harry growing up.

The act of touch, in a tender or loving manner, had been absent from his life, and it left a deep burning hole within him that was hard to fill. As a child he had always dreamt of his faceless mother—his mother would put her arms around him, tell him "I love you, Harry..." But these were only dreams, and however vivid dreams can be, there is

no real physical feeling involved, so whenever Harry woke again he was still just as bruised and cold and unloved as ever.

The deep, burning hole this left in him made it impossible for him to anticipate that he would feel so...utterly...captivated by Angelina's bold gestures of affection towards him. Of course, experiencing gestures of kinship and esteem from the people he called friends and adults alike once he'd left the confines of Privet Drive had prepared him a little; especially the grand, wrap-my-arms-around-you-and-squeeze-you-till-you-can't-breathe hugs that Mrs. Weasley gave him. Moments like these softened him and helped to ease away the resentment and bitterness he felt as he got older, but they had not prepared him for Angelina.

Angelina looked into his eyes, her sullen manner from the past week now gone and a playful, naughty girlishness replacing it.

"Wanna see something?"

Harry's breathing had stalled somewhere between his chest and his throat. He swallowed but could not manage the breath to speak just yet, so he nodded. She bit her lip in her smile and let him go to take hold of the thin strings that tied a little opening at the neck of her nightgown. He watched, beside himself with anticipation, as her slender fingers pulled the string and the knot grew loose, eventually falling apart until the opening was no longer secure. Just beneath lay her breasts, which were only protected by the thin fabric of the nightgown, so it was almost like seeing them naked. Her chest rose and fell splendidly as she poised her hands, gripping the sides of the opening in readiness to expose her flesh to him, her eyes searching his somewhat imploringly.

Harry's heart wanted out of his chest and it was making a great show of it. The two of them were under his covers with the only illumination coming from the moonlight creeping in through whatever crevice it could find above their heads. A thin shaft of light ran down the side of her face, over her left eye, continuing along her neck and fading away just under where she wanted him to look. Harry felt his mouth curve into a smile, and she took this to mean that he wanted to see...

Angelina opened the nightgown further and Harry's new friend the swell of arousal descended upon him instantly, forcing out the fear that was present moments before it.

It was dark under the covers, but the small stream of light provided enough for him to see the dim outline of two rather beautiful curves and two supple, round points. Angelina's chest rose and fell slowly...she was just as nervous as he was, he could tell. There was also the risk they were taking; doing this in a room full of slumbering boys. Should any of Harry's roommates wake up...

"Do you like them?"

Harry lifted his eyes from her breasts and met her gaze. "Yes, very much. I-I mean, er...I'm just uh..." he couldn't help but to grin stupidly and let out a bit of nervous laughter. "Sorry. Yes. They're quite pretty."

Angelina reached out for him and returned his big smile. "It's ok, come here." She was speaking so softly, so gently, and when she took hold of his hand and brought it over to her he let it go without protest. He was tingling all over; their breath was making a warm little bubble that shut out the frost that was developing on his window.

Harry wanted to, oh Merlin, he wanted to...his hand, guided by hers, cupped one of her smooth breasts. He didn't dare look down at it; just into her eyes as his thumb moved across the surface of her warm flesh. He felt the minuscule bumps on her areoles, and then her taut yet springy nipple...

Harry's thoughts as his fingers explored manifested themselves in his pajama bottoms; in seconds he had an erection. He looked down at himself and instantly let go of her. "Oh no..." he breathed, unsure why exactly he was feeling so insecure about it. Angelina laughed softly and he felt his cheeks burn. "Sorry..."

"No, don't be..." she whispered, that usual tone of hers emerging again. He didn't want to look at her, he was horrified; both because he was so inexplicably embarrassed and because she was being so patient and coaxing about it—it suddenly mattered to him that she

was two years older. Angelina simply took his blazing cheeks in her cool hands and brought his face to hers. She kissed him a few times on the lips. He felt a beam of heat run down to his crotch as she whispered, "That's kind of what I wanted."

His pants were very tight, and he was straining against them down there, especially with her so close to him. "This is a bit uncomfortable."

She laughed aloud this time, and there were faint grunts from the darkness, accompanied by the sounds of moving bodies. Harry tried to shush her, but found himself giving in and they laughed nervously for several minutes. The covers they were hidden under trembled along with the soft mattress as their laughter grew more intense. Angelina scooted closer to him and he tried to make himself not feel her supple breasts pressing against his arm.

"It's not going away..."

"It's not supposed to yet." He looked to find her staring down at it, a thoughtful frown etching her features. She lifted her fingers.

"No, don't touch it!" he hissed, mortified. Actually, he really wanted her to, but he did not wish to wake the others. He could only imagine what they would do if they woke up to strange noises coming from under Harry's covers...

Angelina trembled again with laughter. "No?"

"No!"

"Scabbers, stop eating my Droobles!" Ron said loudly.

They lay still and silent. Harry reached up and took some of the comforter in his hand, inching it down until the top of his head and eyes were exposed. He peeked around, squinting at the blurry darkness. Nothing stirred. It seemed they were all still asleep. Relieved, Harry ducked back under the covers...only to discover that Angelina was in the middle of reaching down again to pull the string on his pajama bottoms.

"Hey, no, no, no, that is definitely touching! You want to wake my--?" He tried to take her hand away but she used this action to pull him closer to her until he was pressed tightly against her, their legs entwining again and his...middle...finding warm flesh to rub against. He closed his eyes, pushing a soft gasp hotly out of his open mouth before swallowing thickly and uttering: "Angelina...lemme go..."

"No..." She was biting his neck, holding him close. He felt her hands gripping the skin on his back. Her body conformed to his, her breasts rubbing against his chest; a mingling of skin and soft fabric from her nightgown that made the blood pump down through him heavily. He was wide awake, and soon his roommates would be too if she didn't stop. He wanted to...he wanted to...do things...reach under her gown and...take off her panties...kiss her and touch her...feel her fingers on him...against his...

Harry shook his head hard and disentangled himself from her. "I think I heard someone wake up," he lied, relieved when she stopped kissing his neck and looked up at the opening in the covers.

There was silence and she turned her gaze back down to him, releasing him with an understanding smile. It was her turn to apologize. "Sorry..."

"For what?"

"I guess I shouldn't have, uh..." She reached up and began to tie the strings on her gown again. He watched her, realizing that she was ashamed of herself. He touched her hand with his.

"I've never done this before," Harry said honestly. He didn't just mean sex, but all of it. "You make me feel..." he took a deep breath, that hole in him smoldering. "You make me feel so..." A knot formed in his throat and Harry stopped speaking.

Angelina studied his face for a short while before leaning in and kissing him again. "I want you Harry..." she whispered; honesty clear in her eyes and her voice. "I can't help it. But...I don't want to rush you."

Harry tilted his head at her, powerful curiosity poking at him. The words ‘I want you’ permeated the quiet; burned into him and made him feel...why? Why did she want him; why did she like him so much? He opened his mouth, questions forming in the back of his throat and old self-hatred beginning to writhe around in the hidden corners of his mind. He tried again to speak.

“You’re not rushing me. It’s just that...um...” Harry’s heart thumped; he couldn’t get it out properly. “I’m not...n-nobody’s ever said...that, I mean...”

His nostrils burned. He didn’t want his eyes to well up—she was looking at him intensely. Aunt Petunia hated when he showed the slightest bit of weakness. She would ridicule him mercilessly for crying if he hurt himself, or if anyone else hurt him, or even if he was just upset. He was too young then, and too angry now, to realize that she only hated this because it confronted her with her own cruelty. Harry hated it as well, though. Especially in moments like this, when the person witnessing his vulnerability was someone like Angelina. Harry really cared what she thought of him. He took a deep breath; starting over yet again; fighting off those things he dreaded with all his might—those hot, wet things that desperately wanted release. Not in front of her!

“I mean that I want you to understand why I, uh, pushed you away...I-I’m kind of...not used to people...”

“Touching you?” came her tender reply, and he grimaced—the tears burned hot in a swell of emotion and then broke loose. He closed his eyes to hide them from her as he nodded, and she continued, stroking his neck and jaw with her slender fingers. Damn it, he did not want to cry! “Kissing you? Telling you they care for you?”

“Not really, no,” Harry took in a deep, ragged breath and reached up to rub away the tears before shaking his head at her. “But it’s not a big deal. I don’t even know why I’m...this is...really embarrassing.”

"Don't be embarrassed Harry. It's okay..." He was silent for a while, not wishing to manage tears again, before she whispered, "What did those Muggles do to you?"

He laughed but it was more like a choked back sob and he turned his face away from hers, angry that he had thought about these things at precisely the wrong moment. He had been fine earlier; whatever it was that brought this on, Harry resented it. He hadn't known—hadn't realized that so much touch, so much affection would affect him that way. Poor boy didn't know what to do with himself. His disbelief of her fancy for him had been shattered; there was nothing left but for him to accept that Angelina wanted to be close to him for simply being Harry, when for most of his childhood he was rejected because he was who he was. "Nothing...they just don't think much of me, that's all." He kept his voice light.

When he had managed to pull it together, Harry lay on his back, staring at the dark comforter. He felt Angelina snuggle up to him and turned his head to rest against her soft hair.

"Well I like you..." she whispered.

Even if I'm a crybaby, he thought, but muttered: "Thanks."

"Do you like me?" She was touching him at the base of his stomach. It tickled him, but soon after that her hand slid down further and his discomfort from earlier reared up again. Tears forgotten, Harry swallowed but her hand did not explore further.

"Yes..."

They talked for a while. It must have been very late, but it didn't perturb them. He asked her what her dream had been about. Angelina hesitated but sighed and told him that it had been about him and Malfoy.

"You were fighting, and you wouldn't stop hitting him in the face." Harry slanted his mouth into a smile, thankful she couldn't see it, but then she continued: "His face was so bloody and barely recognizable. You just kept hitting him and hitting him. I screamed for you to stop

but you wouldn't. And Umbridge was there. She had a whip. She was letting you hit him, because she knew the more you did the more trouble you would be in. And she was going to whip you with that thing for each time you hit Malfoy....she was laughing."

Harry was not smiling anymore. Angelina hugged him tight. There was a long silence and then she asked quietly what his dream was. He considered her, and then told her: "There was a door I couldn't reach. There's something behind it that I want really badly, but...I can never get to it."

"What do you think is behind it?"

"That's the stupid part—I have no idea what it is. But every time I have the dream, I feel myself getting closer and closer...still I always wake up before I reach it. I hate waking up sometimes..."

Angelina told him that maybe he wasn't meant to open that door quite yet, and he got the sense that she was drawing a comparison to their rapidly increasing sexual exploration with each other, but he said nothing in response. They fell asleep a while after that, she tucked into his arms with her cool face resting on his bare chest. It was the first time he'd ever slept with someone so close to him, in his bed, holding him almost as if for protection. It felt really, really, really good to have a girlfriend. Sleep spoke to him in his head: Ron and Hermione should have this. If I have to force that git to talk to her....she'll be sneaking in here all the time...no, no Hermione doesn't like breaking rules and having girls in our beds has got to be grounds for expulsion or at the very least some hard-core detention...

Slumber took hold of him and the thought faded away.

Chapter Nineteen: Boys Will Be Boys Part Two: A Little Help from His Friends

Angelina found herself doing this a lot over the past few weeks, ever since Harry had uttered to her what this boy had told him. Staring at Draco Malfoy. It was not merely that she felt uneasy or that when she looked at him her heart gave a lurch. It was his attitude. Yes, she had rightly suspected him of stealing her things, and yes she knew that if given the chance he would lie just to see Harry squirm. But this somehow felt different. It was the boldness of that lie and his silence about it afterwards that troubled her most.

So yes, she watched him.

Her eyes bore into his blond head and callous smile like probes searching for some revealing gesture or word. She didn't know what exactly she was searching for, or why. She just felt...for instance: her dream. It had been about Harry pounding his face in, as she had described, but that was not all. Angelina had left out the strangest part; it bothered her somewhat more than Umbridge brandishing a whip and cackling madly. In the beginning of the dream there was only Angelina and Draco.

They were on the Quidditch pitch, and he stood facing her. The night sky hung over their heads; the bleacher stands looming silent and empty. He looked angry but panic-stricken. She felt numb all over. He was aiming his wand at her. There was no movement, no words between them. It was as if the universe had paused; fastened in place on a scene that was in mid-play. Though they looked at each other; her face hot with rage and his trembling with that odd combination of fear and malice; they did not speak or move perhaps because they could not. She knew this...somehow she knew this. They could not...there was something missing, but instead of unfolding in her mind it remained in a perpetual state of stillness. His wand remained pointed right at her, and for her there was nothing but that elusive feeling...

And then Harry had shown up, leaping out of nothingness like some wild-haired apparition and pouncing on Malfoy. They rolled around for a moment and then Harry grabbed a handful of Draco's white-blond

locks and yanked his head back. “You trying to kiss my girlfriend?” he snarled. And than—SLAM!—he drove his fist right into Draco’s face, causing Angelina to cry out. She watched, horrified, as Harry began punching his enemy, hard. He punched once, twice, three times...and again. And again. She screamed.

“Harry, stop it!”

“Oh, no, Potter, do please continue...” Umbridge was there, now, her whip curling at her feet like a sleek black snake, her eyes alight with evil; her nasty smile so wide and inhuman that she looked like some sort of demented clown. “Hit him again!”

“No!” Angelina tried to run and stop Harry, who was whaling on Draco like the dickens, his fist slamming repeatedly—awfully—into the other boy’s bloody, unrecognizable face. Umbridge grabbed her, her hold like an iron vise, and would not let go.

“Yes, you little brute; harder! Harder!”

Angelina turned and twisted around in her bed, trying to free herself from Umbridge’s grip, whimpering for Harry to stop. She’s going to get you—she’s going to hurt you so bad, Harry, please stop!

She woke up to the explosion of the last blow, which in her dream had broken something in Malfoy’s face with a loud crack, drenched in sweat. Her chest was heaving mercilessly, her eyes flew all over the room, she was so afraid. Katie stirred, but did not wake. Angelina sat there in bed for a long time, calming herself.

“It was just a dream,” she whispered against her roommate’s snoring. Just a dream...

Still, she could not go back to sleep. She didn’t want to. She wanted to be close to Harry. This realization clicked very subtlety, like the way a person realizes they are hungry and could eat something. She simply needed to be held by him, the boy with the stunning green eyes and bashful smile. She left her roommates to their own dreams and went to the boys’ side of Gryffindor Tower, prepared to have to wake him. Prepared, even, to be rejected.

Through her panic about her nightmare arose a rather keen daring when she was with Harry that manifested itself in quite an interesting way. It almost reminded her of her summer visit with the Weasleys, and Fred's tiny little chuckle of surprise when she said that she didn't mind if he wanted to kiss her. And he had. It was curiosity, more than anything...innocent curiosity. He kissed her, and they kissed for a long time, and when it was over he said that it was nice but he would rather go and play a game of Quidditch. And she had agreed.

It was the same, sort of, with Harry—her actions were the result of curiosity, but quite a different kind. A kind less innocent and more intense; a kind more sensual in nature. Angelina's curiosity about Harry's reactions to her affection towards him motivated her to do more; allow him to see and feel more; in order to satisfy her own need to witness the effect on him. She had not expected him to cry, of course. From the looks of him, neither did he. He seemed ashamed of it. She understood why.

She had heard; from various sources that included Fred, George, and Hermione; about the way he was raised. He grew up with Muggle guardians who despised anything 'abnormal' (that meant magic, she knew) and who mistreated him awfully. "They treat him like shite; me and George sawr'it with our own eyes," Fred had told her once when she asked why they had stolen their father's flying car to pick him up. "There were bars on his windows and he hadn't had anything to eat—you should have seen him at breakfast...poor lad."

From the small details of things she had heard over the years, it sounded to Angelina like down right abuse. She hesitated, however, in ever asking Harry anything about it. That night had been the closest she had ever come to broaching the subject with him—and his response? A pitiful, heartbreaking little sob that angered him to let go, she could see. She decided that then wasn't the time, and eventually (hopefully) they could talk about it at length.

There was another matter, after all, that needed attending to.

Angelina's thoughts, from the moment she set foot in the common room that Tuesday night after practice and every day since, were

clouded and unsure. Confusion was not the word. She had come to this conclusion after a few days of thinking hard: there was a period of time between her sealing the jinx on her locker and her seeing Harry waiting for her in the common room where no images or feelings appeared in her memory other than blank darkness. She must've walked back by herself; she must have seen the sky, felt the breeze of the chilly night air, thought about Harry or the match or something. She must have spoken the password to the fat lady or even seen a student or two hurrying back to their dorms to catch curfew but no...she couldn't remember doing any of that.

There was just nothing there of what she had done, seen, or said after pointing her wand at that locker or before seeing Harry's weary smile as she entered the dark common room. Aside from that gaping emptiness there was her slightly uneasy recollection of not wishing Harry to touch her or say too much. His questions annoyed her and it was all she could do not to snap at him. Holding his hand, though she felt she ought to want to, was less like it should've been and more like holding the sweaty, clammy hand of some ridiculous little kid....

This feeling faded, of course (bringing with it an appropriate amount of confusion), but the fact that it had been there at all suggested something strange. His questions, though annoying, were right on point, which further annoyed her. Why was her Quidditch shirt torn? And what was with her dirty knees and the dirt she had washed out of her hair? She remembered the practice drill completely—no one grabbed her and she hadn't fallen to her recollection.

The worst evidence, however, had to be the bruises on her wrists, which she guessed that Harry hadn't noticed. But she had...she'd stared down at them for the longest time in the shower, her mind drawing a complete blank. They were tender and had faint marks on them. She breathed hard, the water running over her eyes and hair and body...she felt as if these wounds were an indication not of Quidditch but of struggle. Struggle? She could make out faint...fingerprints...that didn't make any sense!

The more Angelina thought about it, as the days progressed, the worse she felt. The harder she tried to remember any small detail of

those minutes between jinx and crackling fire, the more her cold, slinky panic grew.

And then: "Malfoy said some stuff...about you. He said—Angelina he said he knows why I like you now...said you two had 'fun'..." Harry's anger was genuine and his eyes were full of dread. "You would tell me if he tried to put his hands on you--?"

Would she tell him? Would she...? Well damn it she didn't know, now did she? Because there was nothing there! But his words to her rang and echoed in her mind, and they became stuck there in her thoughts and filled her with coldness and she remembered those tender marks on her wrists and that blank, blank spot in time. Why would Malfoy say such things? She tried to dismiss his actions just as much to herself as to Harry. She tried to pass it off—he was just being Malfoy. It was just like the practice drill. Yes, yes. No truth to the tale whatsoever.

What Harry did not see as they were leaving the Great Hall that night either, was Malfoy, who had not come down to dinner. Standing a good way ahead of them, watching the students pass from the shadow of some corridor, his hands in his pockets, leaning. He was waiting for Crabbe and Goyle to reach him in the fray so they could walk together, probably. Harry had been whispering with Hermione. Angelina was not paying attention to them. She was thinking...and her eyes caught sight of him at the same time his caught sight of her. He looked at her so...there wasn't quite a smile on his face but the shadow of that familiar sneer could be seen. That wasn't what bothered her. The look in his eyes...they burned. They burned with the same mixture of fear and malice that she would later see in her dream. He watched her, and she watched him...and then he slipped into the crowd of students and for the next few weeks there was no word from him to her at all. He did not tease her. When he was with his friends, he let them taunt her and whoever she was with, but he did little more than laugh quietly or smirk. Though he stood quiet, his eyes remained burning into her as they did after dinner that night.

So she watched him. And she dove into her game. When she wasn't blowing her whistle on the pitch or pouring over homework or kissing Harry, she was watching Draco. He acted normal for the most part--

his actions did not change around Harry or any of her other friends, but with Angelina they became uncharacteristic. This gave him away.

"Hermione, can I ask you something?"

There was a night in which Angelina had one of those 'click' moments. It had been after one of their D.A. meetings. After personally escorting Angelina, Ginny, Hermione, and some other Gryffindors back to the common room, Harry had gone back to make sure everyone else got out safely. The girls had spent a while talking about how good Harry was and how nicely everyone was coming along. They'd started comparing him to some of the other teachers they'd had, saying that he could easily be as cool as Lupin, or even Moody. Someone brought up Gilderoy Lockhart. "To think he ended up losing his memory when he'd taken it away from so many others! Stupid, really." Ginny had said, ignoring the fact that she'd had a little crush on him. "What an imposter he was..."

Angelina participated in the conversation, but her brain was buzzing frantically. Memory charm...Lockhart's memory charm. She thought. And thought. And thought. And finally a couple of days later she found Hermione in the library after being very distracted at Quidditch practice and asked her: "How much do you know about Memory Charms?"

The fifth year girl frowned thoughtfully. "Only what I've read. Why?"

Angelina made up an excuse about being curious after their conversation about Lockhart (which was the truth, really) and Hermione told her what she knew. "They're complicated, even though they seem simple. A person has to really know what they're doing for them to work properly. I expect Lockhart spent a lot of time perfecting his," she said casually. "You can use them to wipe out a small piece of someone's memory, or weeks, months, even years...but if you're not careful you could end up really messing up the mind. That's why people have to be specially licensed to perform them. You know, Aurors and Obliviators and such..."

"Well what if I was to do one? Or you...? Or just any old kid?"

"Um..." Hermione smiled uncertainly. "I doubt it would be very smart to attempt it at our level. We'd likely end up really hurting someone—like scrambling their brains..."

"But what if we didn't?" Angelina pressed.

"Well...I suppose then that unless we're really talented (or just really lucky), the most we could do is wipe out some memory temporarily. I don't think the charm would be very strong if one of us tried it. It might only last for as long as the mind was willing to accept the memory loss."

Angelina's pulse raced and she felt as if her brain were jumping up and down with excitement. "What do you mean, 'if the mind is willing to accept...'"?

Hermione looked at her funny for a beat, then excused herself and went off into the stacks. Angelina thought for a second that the girl was going to fetch Madame Pince and tell her that her friend needed to go to the hospital wing, for she knew she was acting strangely but she couldn't help it. She was so close to understanding what was happening to her. Hermione did not return with the bitter old librarian but she did have a copy of a textbook entitled "The Mysteries of the Mind and Memory Alteration."

"Let's see..." she thumbed through some pages familiarly until she found what she was looking for and then gave a happy little "Aha." She turned the book around so that Angelina could read and pointed to a passage on the left page somewhere in the middle. "There it is."

Angelina read.

"The mind cannot be fooled easily. Though many inexperienced wizards incorrectly believe that simply evoking the magic necessary to alter another's memories—indeed their very feelings and thoughts during any given period of time—will serve the purpose fully and without complication, there is still the matter of will. Great concentration and power is needed to bend a person's mind to one's will, and while this implies the use of the dark principles present in such curses as the Unforgivable Impirius, it does not inherit them.

The Memory Charm “Oblivate” and its brother “Oblivia Maximum” (which is used by most Obliviators to wipe away years of memory and is not recommended for use by unqualified wizards), will only work if the wizard casting them is in total control of his own magic and emotion during the incantation and assertion of the spell.

“This means more than simply speaking clearly and performing the right wrist movement. This means extreme concentration and dedication—that is follow through. Uncertainty or hesitation leads to disaster, and the result could seriously harm the mind. The two ends of the spectrum are: the most extreme being addled brains, loss of identity or ability to function properly, and the most benign (though still harmful, given the necessity to use the charm in the first place) being the mind’s resistance of the spell.”

Angelina’s finger was pressed so hard on the page as she ran it along each line, completely engrossed, that it was turning white. She read, her eyes growing narrow with concentration and her mouth moving silently, as Hermione looked on.

“The charm; if cast without follow through and concentrated intent; over time could wear off, or become weak and fade away. One does not need to explain the dangers of such an occurrence. For most, the memory that was Obliviated will present itself subconsciously at first—in a strange feeling of nostalgia or loss or mystification. The person becomes aware that there is something they are forgetting, which leads to scrutiny of his or her own mind. This need to account for the unexplainable absence of thought or action in a particular time frame grows more intense and more persistent as time progresses, and soon the mind’s struggle to retrieve these memories manifests itself in other ways. These ways can be dreams (Angelina audibly gasped), words or images or even smells from the wiped memory surfacing at odd times, and even fragments of the memory itself appearing unbidden.”

Angelina thanked Hermione and immediately checked the book out. As she read it, she learned that the spell castor could use the charm to suggest what memories (or hints of something like memory) would replace the erased one. All Angelina remembered of that night was that she had been tired, and that she just wanted to go to sleep. She

saw Harry, became annoyed by him, and went off to take a shower. Her dream was beginning to make sense, as did her mind bringing to her the idea of struggle when she looked at her wrists. And Harry's words. She read that only a very strong-willed person or a person who practices Occlumency can resist (and therefore reverse the effects of) a Memory Charm. If there was one way of describing Angelina, it was strong-willed. There were a whole chapter dedicated to 'Occlumency' but Angelina discerned from glancing through it that it was not a skill easily mastered—and in any case it would not help her to attempt it now. The memory was gone.

The stillness of that image—her and Draco standing on the pitch; his wand aimed at her; his eyes filled with panic—would not go away.

She made up her mind that she would confront to him. She didn't know when she would do this, but it had to be done. She hoped that he would laugh at her, call her insane, and go on teasing her like he had before all of this. His silence and his intensity towards her lately...it was disturbing, quite frankly. But, Angelina could not claim that her own duality over the weeks was lost on her. Yes she was two different people during winter's descent. The Angelina that worked hard at Quidditch and laughed and held hands with her boyfriend—and the Angelina that mulled in dark thoughts about a boy that was almost certainly the reason for them.

Would she tell Harry 'if...'? Would she?

Yes without hesitation; because, as she would come to find out, Harry was not to be underestimated. That was Malfoy's mistake as much as hers.

Harry stared at the tattered notebook that Fred was holding out to him. "What's this?"

The twins exchanged meaningful looks and chimed: "Our pride and joy." Fred lovingly stroked the green leather, which was so misused that it seemed to groan in protest. Harry tilted his head to read an inscription on the bottom corner: W.W.W. He knew that stood for Weasley's Wizard Wheezies. He wanted to ask just how long the two of them had been at this whole joke shop thing, but judging by the

looks of that ratty book, it appeared that they had this dream for years—possibly even since before they first started Hogwarts.

“Now we’re going to show you something, Harry, but understand this is not something we ever do.” George warned.

“I understand.”

“No, swear you’ll never reveal the secrets of this sacred text.” Fred demanded. “Swear that if you ever do, you hope your nose falls off.”

“Um...I don’t think I want my nose to fall...off...”

“Fraid you’ve got no choice, mate. Swear it,” said George. The pair of them were looking at him quite seriously. Harry sighed and rolled his eyes, muttering ‘I swear’ under his breath. “Well done. Fred, you do the honors.”

Fred opened the book and found a page, marked by a beat-up looking Drooble’s Chews rapper. “Ah...here we are. Our list of Homemade Hexes.”

The twins had bewitched Frisbees and all kinds of novelty items that they’d produced, including fireworks and goodness knew what else. But among all that, they had maintained an ever-growing collection of what they called Homemade Hexes that they planned to publish one day for “misbehaving young witches and wizards everywhere”.

“We want you to use some of these.”

“Me?”

Fred nodded, his grin spreading ala-Umbridge, curling up deviously. “You see, we know us, and we know you. You’re a fighter, Harry. Well we are too, don’t get me wrong, and that’s why we’ll be there to back you up, but what we really want is to see these babies tested out by someone other than ourselves. Someone with skilled hands. Who better than you?”

"I don't get you..." Harry stared at them both, his eyes flickering from one twin to the other. He thought he had an idea, but rather than elaborating just then, they only gestured, in unison, to the book in Fred's hands.

Harry took the book from Fred and squinted down at either his or George's tiny, irregular writing. His eyes ran down a list of hexes and jinxes and spells that the boys had invented, organized by date and time of conception, name, and side-effects. His eyes caught one named The Silly Slapper. He chuckled. This one was a spell that caused the victim to feel a good, sharp slap to the face every time he took a step, no matter what direction. There was a comical little sketch right next to it that showed a stick figure turning in all directions and being knocked back by some invisible force. "That one's not bad..." Harry said to himself.

"Take a look at this one!" Fred pointed.

Harry read the underlined word Jackass. He laughed aloud.
"What...?"

"Just read it, it's a doosie."

Harry read about the Jackass Jinx. It basically did just as the title indicated: it gave the victim of the jinx long, pointy ears, big teeth, a swishy black tail, and the unmistakable neigh of a donkey. The effects were written to last for a long period of time, and side effects included an extreme craving for hay. Harry pictured Malfoy eating hay.

"Yeah, we tried that one a couple of summers ago. Blimey that could've been a disaster—luckily all I had to do was pretend to be George so he could recover, but it was damned hard work walking in and out of rooms twice all the time and remembering whose name I was supposed to answer to and all that. Sheesh, and all that hay...he couldn't stop munching on the stuff." Fred said casually.

"Hey, the Eat Slugs hex! You guys came up with that one?" Harry asked, looking up from the book. They nodded, adopting looks of scandal.

"Yes we did. It pained us to see our dear brother try to use it with that shoddy wand he had."

"But it was quite funny to see him vomiting up all those slugs!"

Harry had lost track of which one was talking. He kept skimming over their list, letting out little sounds of intrigue when he came across something particularly interesting or clever. There was one called The Giggle Box (pretty silly, that—it made the victim giggle uncontrollably, no matter what anyone said, until they were quite literally blue in the face), and something called #307. There were a bunch of question marks next to this number, as if they hadn't come up with a good name for it yet. It was a chew (they loved candy and gum, these boys, for most of their potions came in chewable form), that made the eater's voice sound like anyone's. He was puzzled by this but then read on. According to the twins, if you can do an impression of someone, you could sound exactly like them if you ate one of their chews. "Hey, this one looks really useful," he said, pointing it out to them.

"Ah, number three hundred and seven. Not quite finished with that one yet. For now we can only make it sound like Mum," said George. "Or maybe it's that we can't do any other proper impressions...we'll have to test it out on you, maybe. Your impressions are pretty good, I hear."

"So, what do you think, Harry?"

"I think you guys should've been using these all along! I could've used The Silly Slapper at the practice drill."

Fred shrugged. "We only just got that one right. Before it would only slap you when it wanted to, and you'd go 'round thinking the spell had worn off and then all of a sudden you're attacking first years in the hall 'cause you think they've pelted you with something."

Harry laughed and gave the book back. He supposed that Fred and George had their reasons for making him wait so long just to look at a list of Homemade Hexes. He supposed, even, that it would be great fun to watch Malfoy get slapped in the face every time he took a step,

or giggle uncontrollably in Snape's class, or (his favorite) suddenly sprout donkey ears and big yellow donkey teeth. But...all this seemed rather more like Fred and George and less like Harry. What would Harry do to Malfoy given the chance? He supposed he didn't rightly know. His fury from the night he confronted Angelina was diminished somewhat, especially since she had come around.

"Okay, so where do my 'skilled hands' come in?"

The twins once again exchanged meaningful looks.

"You're gonna challenge Malfoy to a duel!" George gushed.

"A what?" Harry didn't know whether to be extremely pleased or horribly surprised. He opted for both. "But...I haven't dueled since second year when that git Lockhart had that club."

"Yeah, and it was fun wasn't it? And you were good, from what we hear." Fred said quickly, in a hushed whisper. Madame Pince was lurking a few paces away, eyeing them darkly. "And who's been teaching us, you know...defense against the Dark Arts? You!"

Harry sat thinking carefully. If he had been thinking straight at all instead of being mired by blind rage, he supposed that he could have challenged Malfoy from the off. But, then...if Malfoy had proven anything to him in their years of knowing each other, it was that he usually avoided confrontation with Harry one-on-one. He only taunted, teased, and insulted Harry when a teacher was somewhere in the vicinity, didn't he? Well, not all the time, but certainly enough for Harry to deduce that Malfoy would just as soon take Harry's challenge to Umbridge or Snape. He said as much to the twins.

"Yeah, we thought of that." They both said. Fred continued: "That's part of why it took us so bloody long to come to you. We may be a bit cheeky by appearances, but we've got sharp minds under these gorgeous locks, mate." Fred tapped the side of his head with his finger. Harry wanted to mention their OWL exams but decided against it.

"Understand, Harry we thought it best not to let you in on this part, just in case." George supplied. "You see, we don't especially care for the administration this year, so worrying about getting in trouble doesn't seem to hinder us as much as it used to."

"Yeah," said Fred. "First we had to use this." He carefully pulled a brand new-looking quill from the folds of his robes as though he didn't want a single eye outside their group to fall upon it. The quill tip was red.

"What's that?" Harry asked, intrigued.

"Our other pride and joy." The boys chimed.

"It's a quill that mimics handwriting." Fred whispered, and as a demonstration he took hold of Harry's parchment and traced the last few words of a sentence he'd been writing with the quill. He then found a clean sheet and began writing on it. Harry stared in amazement as Fred wrote "I love Angelina Johnson" on the parchment in exactly his sprawling, scratchy handwriting.

"Wow..." he breathed, watching as Fred wiped the parchment clean with his wand. "Okay, so who's handwriting did you mimic with that?"

"Malfoy's, of course." George answered as if it should've been obvious. "That's what took so long. We had to get a sample of his chicken scratch." He beamed. "Finally got, it, though. A few days ago. Bribed this brilliant little beast of a first year to nick it and bring it to us." He showed Harry a piece of parchment that had been brutally attacked by erratic, unclean handwriting. He squinted at some of the words. It looked like Malfoy hadn't been paying attention in his History of Magic class with the Ravenclaws. He drew little people scurrying about under a big black boot that was going to crush them. There was what looked like a Dementor lurking around in the middle of an unfinished paragraph on the Goblin Wars. He'd written barely recognizable words in tight, strung together sentences. Harry thought he caught Angelina's name. He snatched the parchment from George. There was Angelina's name, alright, written and crossed out over and over again across the bottom of the page. And right beneath it was a rather curious sentence.

I like her...?

Harry's heart sped up, pumping double fast as he re-read this ugly writing a few times more. Malfoy had crossed out the word 'like' twice and replaced it with 'hate' but Harry was not fooled. He felt bitter all over and his wand hand was itching. So he likes my girlfriend, does he? Harry thought coldly. "That little shit..." he whispered aloud.

"Knew that would get your goat, lad," Fred said seriously, prying the parchment out of the boy's hands. "Me and George planned this pretty carefully. Now, it could probably blow up in our faces, but if you're in we'll tell you what's next." Harry's lips were tight with anger but he nodded that he was in. The twins went on telling them about their plans, and he listened, growing more and more dedicated to the idea as they talked. What they had done was very risky, in the sense that as Fred put it, it could blow up in their faces and they'd all be in big trouble. "But, we know guys like Malfoy. And we know tight-arsed disciplinarians like Umbridge," Fred went on. "And if there is anything they are, it's predictable. They'll do it like we planned it and then Malfoy'll be so riled up and humiliated that he'll take your challenge just to prove he's no yellow belly."

"Which he is, and a fool to boot," George added.

"All we ask is that you get in a few of these gems..." Fred patted the tattered notebook paternally again. "...while you fight. We're trusting you to make us proud, Potter. Think you can handle it?"

"I think I can handle it." Harry calmed himself, setting aside his anger for better use later. The twins had proven themselves to be quite a bit more than trouble-making clowns—they were scheming, kind of brilliant inventors, and he was glad to have them on his side.

"Good!" they chimed.

Harry saw Hermione emerging from the stacks, arms full of books, and cleared his throat in warning. "So, dinner is a fine time to do it, don't you think, George? Lots of people in the Great Hall." Fred said conspiratorially.

"Yeah I reckon that's a good place to start. So see you at dinner, Harry?"

Harry blinked unsurely, but nodded. "Okay..."

"Great. See ya, Granger." Fred and George acknowledged Hermione as they left, but did not attempt to help her with her books. She rolled her eyes and gave Harry an exasperated look.

"What are those two doing in the library?"

"Dunno—just passing through, I guess." He stood up to help her, taking some of the books from her arms. As he stacked them up on the table, he frowned, reading through the titles. He picked up a book called *Escaping Obliviation*. "What's this for?"

"Oh, I thought I'd give that one to Angelina," Hermione said casually. "She's taken an interest in Memory Charms."

Harry stared at the cover. "Why?"

"I don't know. Why don't you ask her?"

He thought about it for a second, but reasoned that Hermione was the go-to girl for just about any piece of information one could think of—the girl lived in the library. It wasn't out of the ordinary at all to ask her about something, and it was rather sweet that she had taken the time to fetch Angelina the book.

"What are all these?" he asked, picking up a copy of *The Fundamental Elements of Transfiguration* and thumbing through it.

"I picked those up for you and Ronald. He's spending so much time with Quidditch, he hasn't studied much, and we've got exams coming," she explained, sighing and taking her seat. Harry put the book down and gave her a knowing look as he settled himself back into his own seat. "What?" she made a face.

“Nothing...” Harry picked up his quill and went back to his Astronomy essay. Hermione stared at him for a long while, and he resisted as long he could before she snorted defensively and he laughed aloud.

“What?”

Harry looked at her finally, enjoying that it was his turn to speak to her patiently as if she didn’t get something, because usually she was the one with that role. “Hermione, you are so obvious,” he said, echoing something Ginny had told him about himself a while ago.

“Excuse me? What, exactly, am I being obvious about, then?”

“You and Ron have barely spoken to each other since he kissed you--” she made a pained noise but he ignored it, “--but I see the way you look at him, and I see the way he looks at you, and all this getting him extra books and what you did last night, washing off his Quidditch boots--”

“They were filthy!” she hissed defensively.

Harry continued as if she hadn’t interrupted him. “All of it is rubbish, if you ask me. Just tell him you like him!”

“I...” Hermione bit her lip and shook her head, tapping her quill against her leg anxiously. “I-I just can’t, Harry!”

“Well, why not?” Madame Pince appeared again, seemingly out of nowhere, her stern gaze moving from Harry to Hermione, daring them to raise their voices. Harry went back to his Astronomy and Hermione stiffly opened a book and stared at the page until the woman moved on. When she was gone, Harry immediately abandoned his parchment and looked over at his friend expectantly. “Well...?”

Hermione sighed miserably. “Because I like Viktor.”

Harry rolled his eyes and groaned, despite himself. “You can’t be serious, Hermione.”

"I am, and don't you dare make fun of him, Harry. He's really very sweet. He writes such lovely letters." She smiled wistfully.

Harry stifled a chuckle. "Oh yeah? What's he got to say? 'Dear Hermyna-ninny, it is very cold here all the way over in Bulgaria, but to think of you make-it-me very warm, like when I am putting on my big, fur coat. The end, Love Viktor.'" Hermione gave him a stony glare at his impersonation of Krum's halting English. "Okay, sorry, that wasn't funny." The amused twinkle in his eyes remained, however.

"English is Viktor's fourth language, I'll have you know, and when you get past his grammar mistakes, you'll find that he is very poetic and the letters he writes me are quite romantic."

"Okay, fine. But what about Ron?"

"He just doesn't understand! I'm not doing this to spite him!"

"That's not what I meant. And yes, you are, but what I meant was that you said yourself that you wanted to kiss him back that day."

Hermione shrank in her seat and nodded without looking at him. She gave another pitiful sigh. "I know...I did. I do. I like Ronald, too. That's why this is so difficult."

Harry thought for a moment. Then began, gently: "Well, what do you really know about Viktor? Aside from the fact that he likes writing poetry and can speak four languages (maybe some better than others...)?"

"Well..." Hermione frowned thoughtfully and tapped her quill against her lips. "Um...well when he was here we didn't talk much. He just sort of...sat and watched while I studied or stared into my eyes and things..." Harry stifled another chuckle. "But in such a sweet way!" She added.

"Does he do anything in those letters of his besides tell you how pretty your eyes are?"

"Um...he tells me he misses me. He wants to come back to visit, though I don't know when he'd find the time with the Quidditch season and his studies and everything."

Harry sighed patiently, running his hand through his hair and then turning to a new, clean piece of parchment. Hermione watched him dip his quill in his ink jar and then write: VIKTOR at the top right corner and RON at the top left. "Okay." He wrote the number one. "So, he writes poetry, speaks four languages, and is very sensitive."

"Harry, what are you doing?" Hermione narrowed her eyes at him.

"Hang on a second, shush. On the other hand, though..." he finished writing the last of the things he'd named off, and then dipped his quill again. "He can't speak English very well, he lives in Bulgaria, and you never see him because he's an international Quidditch star."

"Harry--!"

"Oh, and..." He stuck his tongue out like a toddler, writing out the last of his points. "Even if you did see him, all he would do is stare into your eyes for hours and hours and who needs that? Bit uncomfortable if you ask me."

"Well, no one asked you, and you're being a bit of a prat. Now if you don't mind, I need to finish my essay--!"

"So what about Ron, then?" Harry's quill was poised over the parchment. He pretended to think. "Ah yes. Ronald is your best friend—and mine—and you've known him since first year. That's a good one."

"Yes, well, you're my best friend and I've known you since first year, too."

"But you don't want to kiss me, Hermione. Oh, that reminds me—was it a good kiss?"

"You little fungus!" Hermione's cheeks grew red and she swiped at him with the Transfiguration book. Madame Pince cleared her throat

loudly from across the room, her beady eyes staring hard at them. Hermione leaned in and hissed: "That is none of your business!"

"I'll take the blushing as a yes, then." Harry scribbled on the parchment. "Okay...best friend...good kisser..." Harry muttered seriously as if he were working on an Arithmancy problem. "Oh, and you see him every day, that's good."

Hermione shook her head in defeat. "And I love his hair..."

"What?" Harry's smile sort of leapt onto his face, such was his astonishment that she was admitting this to him.

She nodded and looked as if she had just given away the key to her soul. "Yes, yes, I've confessed. I love his red, shiny, long hair and I constantly want to run my fingers through it but seeing as how he isn't speaking to me at the moment, I can hardly go off doing that, can I?"

He grinned. "What else?"

"Urgh this is so juvenile. Um...his laugh, I suppose." Harry jotted this down. "And...and I like how his cheeks get all flushed when he's angry. He sort of pouts a bit, too. Very cute. Maddening, but cute. And his posture, when it isn't annoying, can be rather attractive; the way he sort of swaggers about. Not like Viktor. Viktor's a bit duck-footed..."

Harry had stopped writing. Hermione was lost in her own thoughts, and it pleased him to know that if he had continued his absurd little list Ron's side would be far longer than Viktor's in the positive qualities department. After she realized that he was simply listening to her rattle off all the things she loved about Ron she smiled and rolled her eyes.

"All right, all right, you've made your point."

"So you'll tell Ron you like him, then?"

"What about Viktor?"

"Hermione I hate to say it like this, but that guy has probably got loads of birds throwing themselves all over him every day. He'll get over you. You know you like Ron."

Hermione dipped her own quill into her ink bottle and set off doing her essay again, not responding to his assertion. He felt a bit disappointed, but decided that he had done all he could, and it was up to her after that. He discarded the list and dove back into his Astronomy work. As they were leaving the library, Hermione turned to him and said, "I was going to finish the letter I started to Viktor tonight. I suppose...well, I suppose I should tell him that I've met another boy and that he's really sweet but I don't see us going anywhere."

Harry smiled and wrapped an arm around her, giving her a squeeze before letting her go. "I think he'll take it well, trust me."

"He'll probably be devastated, but I'm willing to deal with that." She made a face at him. "You've gotten yourself a girlfriend and you think you're an expert on matters of the heart, do you?"

"Well, yes, of course." Harry said slyly. He noticed that she was carrying Escaping Obliviation and held his hand out for it. "Hey, I'll take that. I'm going to meet Angelina before dinner; I can give it to her."

"Ooh, thanks, one less to carry." Hermione handed it over. "I hope she finds it useful. You know it's nice that she's taken an interest in extra reading. Strange topic to pick, though..."

"Well, she's smart like you," Harry said proudly. "She's probably gearing up for her NEWT exams. Maybe she needs it for after she graduates—her grandfather was an Auror, you know. I could picture Angelina as an Auror. She's tough. I love that about her..." He realized he was rattling away as Hermione had done earlier and trailed off, his cheeks growing warm.

"Oh it's so cute how you gush over her, Harry!" She teased him about Angelina all the way back to the common room, but he didn't mind. He was just glad he had gotten his point across about Ron. Yes, Harry had gotten himself a girlfriend.

Despite everything that had happened to him, he had finally managed to do something right, and for himself. Slowly, ever so slowly, he became comfortable with himself when he was with her—both in public and behind closed doors. It was more than just holding hands, or kissing her when he felt like it. It was allowing himself the freedom of not caring that everyone could see them; it was the freedom of letting her touch him, hug him, snuggle against him and believing that she wanted to.

A few instances: Angelina often liked to play a game where she would steal his glasses from his face and would not give them back until he obliged her with a kiss. Since he couldn't see without them, he always gave her what she wanted. Kissing her gently on the lips as she sat on his lap in the Great Hall during lunch would certainly have petrified him before, but now he just used his blindness to ignore the hundreds of other students around them. Once she actually held out, keeping them behind her back so he couldn't reach and demanding another kiss.

"Give 'em back..." he muttered against her soft lips.

She shook her head. "Another kiss first."

Other times he would initiate things, having learned this from being attacked by her on several occasions and not being prepared for it. He liked to tickle her--seems juvenile, but the boisterous, spirited laughter that flew out of her when he did this always made his heart soar. He was happy and he wanted everyone to be just as happy as he was.

But there were the ubiquitous problems of Malfoy and Umbridge. The latter simpered and purred her way through class after class and it took all of Harry's willpower to restrain himself when in her grating presence. There was yet no sign of her delivering her end of the bargain with Malfoy, and as a result the other boy's behavior became increasingly inscrutable. Harry almost took this as satisfactory payback for his wrongdoing, but then decided not to be fooled by it in the least. He had wondered, as the weeks passed and nothing

happened, if Malfoy would still go to the Minister. But hearing what the twins had done, Harry now knew that Malfoy would pay for his hesitation. Hell, he would pay for even having the nerve to try to blackmail Delores Umbridge.

“We thought about what you told us, Harry...” Fred had said in the library, referencing what Harry had told them about Malfoy’s ‘deal’ with Umbridge. “Didn’t seem fair to us that he could get away with something like that.”

“Umbridge didn’t seem happy about it, either, but he sounded like he really had something on her.” Harry had responded darkly.

“Yeah, well, maybe he does, but old Delores ain’t the type of person to just roll over for a pipsqueak like Malfoy,” George countered. The lanky Weasley twin shrugged when Harry asked him how he figured that—he had heard her rolling over with his own ears. “We did a bit of deductive reasoning. See, Umbridge needed a good push, is all.”

“A push?”

“Keep up with us, now...” The twins chanted.

A push—that was where the magicked quill and nicking Malfoy’s scribbles came in. They needed the scribbles to forge a note. A note which they would deliver to Umbridge, in Malfoy’s handwriting, that read something like:

You still haven’t done what I told you, Delores. I’m getting impatient.

You’ve got another week, and then I want to see a decree up or I’m going to the Minister.

Tick tock.

-D.M.

“Ooh, she doesn’t like people calling her anything but Professor Umbridge,” Harry had shuddered with a grin. There were a number of things, in fact, that he knew she would not like about that note. Her

first name being the last on the radar, and the nasty ultimatum being the very first.

“Course not,” said Fred. “And Malfoy is just the sort of arrogant arse that would do something like that when he thinks he’s got the upper hand. But,” he lifted a slender finger in warning. “Here’s where it gets tricky—this is the part that could backfire.”

The part that could backfire—the twins knew from seeing it first hand that there was only one person, aside from Snape, that could make Draco feel small, humiliated, and angry enough to fight.

His father, Lucius Malfoy.

“Blondie is just a snot kid. Daddy Malfoy and Umbridge are adults and therefore they believe they know best who can blackmail who. So they had some sort of understanding? So they did some rotten stuff? D’you think Daddy Malfoy wants his son rattling off his dark deeds to the Minister? He’ll put little Draco in his place...”

Harry ate this up like his favorite dessert. The twins had obviously thought this out and planned it very carefully. They explained that in doing this they were essentially killing two birds with one stone: they were giving Malfoy motivation to fight and making it so that he could never gain power from Umbridge to abuse as he pleased. Less room to move around; less means to sniff out the D.A.

The sheer recklessness and danger of the situation made his heart flutter—in a good way. He had many questions.

“Yeah, but how do you know his dad’ll do anything? What if he doesn’t come? And where are we supposed to do this? We can’t exactly go dueling on the tabletops in the Great Hall like last time. We’d be expelled for sure.”

“All planned, mate, all planned,” was all they would say. “Best not to give you too many of the details. The less you know the better. So stop badgering us and trust that the big kids have got it under control.”

Did they? It seemed so, though they all maintained: it was very, very risky. If caught—if any part whatsoever of their plan went awry—they could kiss their time there at Hogwarts goodbye. Harry seemed to be the only one who gave weight to this notion. The twins merely shrugged. “If that’s what happens, then so be it. We’ve got bigger fish to fry—we’ve got ambitions beyond this old place. It’s been good to us, but we can let it go if need be. But you, Harry—” they added chummily, “—you need your education, lad. So we’re gonna protect you in any way we can. But we want to do this. You want to do this?” Harry wanted to do this. “Good.”

The plan was set. All he had to do was wait. He recognized that this was happening, and he was flooded with conflicting thoughts and emotions; the more prominent being righteous anger at Malfoy. Just underneath, however, lay anxiousness about keeping this from Angelina and the others. “They’ll cluck like hens if they found out what we’re up to,” the twins had warned. They even advised against telling Ron right away. Also there were teachers and rules to worry about. They were doing something very wrong. With a little help from his friends, he would soon exact his revenge on Draco Malfoy in the only way that suited him. The very idea of it filled him with excitement.

Harry was fast becoming a new version of himself: one that strode forward and assumed the role of leader in the D.A., growing more and more confident about his abilities with each passing week. One who was maturing in sexuality and embracing his powerfully passionate nature. And also one who was realizing that being good was not always being the winner; at least not where this was concerned.

A DUEL!

His wand hand tingled all day.

Chapter Twenty: Delores' Dementors.

Harry had cautioned all of the D.A. members to be extra-careful, and they established a routine on the nights of each meeting of escorting everyone back safely, no exceptions. They came up with contingency plans should someone stumble upon the Room of Requirement while it was in use by them. They enlisted the help of Dobby, who promised to act as a lookout for them.

Tonight Harry was to meet Dobby in the kitchens before dinner to tell him when exactly to be at his post. Also, he was to go and meet up with Angelina so they could walk to the Great Hall together. She would be getting out of Quidditch practice with Ron and Ginny. Hermione didn't go with him—she was still uneasy about seeing Ron before she wrote to Viktor. "I want to get that bit over with," she explained. "Then Ron and I can talk."

He parted ways with his bushy-haired friend and went along to catch Dobby. The jittery little elf promised to be in the corridor on the seventh floor promptly at seven-thirty to make sure the coast was clear for the meeting.

Harry was on his way to meet up with Angelina and the others when he spotted Cho and some of her friends in the courtyard. He walked along the open corridor, watching her, thinking of her silence towards him ever since she sent him flying into that wall with her Impediment Jinx. Cho often avoided his gaze and barely spoke two words to him these days. When they had their meetings, she and her friend Marietta would always be the last to arrive and the first to leave, sticking by Ron or Hermione to escort them and never Harry. He had let these things go, thinking at first that she just needed time, but soon he began to really hate her stony silence and he longed to have back those times that she would smile sweetly at him or tell her friends to shush if they were laughing at some stupid thing he'd done out of nervousness.

She caught him looking at her and narrowed her eyes at him before turning and telling her friends she had to go. She gathered her things and walked quickly away, taking the wide way around past him to get to the other end of the courtyard so she could enter the open corridor

without having to pass him directly. He sighed with frustration and jogged after her.

"Hey, Cho. Cho!" She kept walking. Harry sped up and caught her just as she was reaching the end that would lead into the main halls. "Hey, wait up a minute."

"What do you want, Harry?" Cho's voice was anything but sweet as she glared at him impatiently. Good grief, he mused to himself, is she really still upset? "I've got to get to the library before dinner..."

He knew she was lying and it made him feel bad. "Hey, what's going on with you? Why are you so mad at me?"

"I beg your pardon?" she fumed. He had never seen her this angry. "You're the one who lied to me about having a girlfriend!"

"Whoa. Cho, I did not lie to you about--!"

"Well, you didn't tell me on purpose, and that's the same as lying!" she shouted. Harry fought the urge to look around and see who was hearing this, opting to let her have out with it so he could reassure her she had been operating under the wrong assumption. "I-I almost kissed you, Harry, and you let me!"

"Hey, I didn't know what you were going to do! You totally sprung it on me, what was I supposed to--?"

"Oh bollocks, yes you did!" He was getting just a little sick of her cutting him off. He clenched his jaw angrily. "I felt like such an idiot, walking around gushing over you like some lovesick airhead...I can't believe I was so foolish!"

"Well, I'm sorry you felt that way, but honestly I didn't mean to do that. You took me by surprise, a bit..." he offered lamely, "...I thought you were still hung up on...um...Cedric." Cho raised an eyebrow at how difficult it had been for him to say Cedric's name before he added: "Not that there's anything wrong with that. I mean to say that I was a little slow on the uptake—I didn't know you wanted to kiss until it was happening, and I should have said something about Angelina before,

but...well, I just didn't. Sorry." Cho still looked as if she wanted to yell at him, but instead she crossed her arms and glared at her shoes. Harry, thankful for the silence, used the pause to assess his feelings for this girl before he put his foot in his mouth again. He took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "Cho, I do like you--"

She scoffed. "If you like me so much, what's the deal with Angelina Johnson?"

"She's my girlfriend." Harry said simply. He didn't think she understood what he meant, because her mouth dropped open and she stamped her foot angrily.

"Harry, you just said you liked me! You're a jerk!" She was turning on her heel to stomp away from him but he rolled his eyes at her and caught her, spinning her around by the arms until she was facing him again. "Let me go, you bloody jerk!"

"Hey, hey, calm down will you?" He laughed at her feeble attempts to hit him and this caused her to screech with fury, her round cheeks turning red as she tried to yank herself free. "Oi, Cho, knock that off--!" he said when she tried to stamp on his foot. He let her go and she stood breathing at him, her eyes like razors. Harry waited for her to try to hit him again, but when she didn't he thought maybe she was going to let him finish. After a beat or two of making sure, he blinked at her patiently. "Listen, you're not letting me finish. I was saying that I do like you, but not like...I used to."

"Like you used to?" Her chest rose and fell rapidly, her eyes sparkled and her smooth, fair skin glowed. He cleared his throat, warning himself to stop noticing these things, before nodding.

"Yeah, like we said in the Room of Requirement. I had a pretty big crush on you." He shrugged and sighed. "But you went off with Cedric and Angelina and me sort of...you know, got together after that."

"Oh." She looked away from him, down at her shoes again, before asking in that tiny, sweet voice of hers: "When you say 'got together'...you mean...?"

"Er...we kissed and stuff, yeah." Harry felt very embarrassed, but pressed on. "I would rather it had been with you, but it just didn't happen like that. So now Angelina and I are together—and we really like each other. I was just so surprised when you told me that you had liked me too that okay maybe I, um, sort of played dumb when I knew you were gonna kiss me, and I'm really sorry." He added this last when she jerked her hand up as if to strike. He really had to figure out why it was impossible to be anything but honest with her. "I guess my point is that I still like you, Cho, but as a friend. I want us to be really good friends."

Cho considered him. She looked slightly crestfallen that he used the term friend to define his feelings for her, but also she looked glad that he had admitted the truth. He could not tell which side was the strongest, though. To his relief, she offered him a tiny smile and lowered her hand.

Without really thinking about it, Harry poked her on her hip. "Cho come on. We can be friends, can't we?"

She frowned but it quickly turned into a smile when he poked her again. "Stop it, Harry."

"Not until you say we're friends." He poked her a third time and she giggled. "See? You're so cute. Come on we have to be friends."

"Don't say things like that, Harry," Cho told him, her eyes becoming serious again. He thought he knew which side of her was stronger, now. Perhaps it would take her longer to think of him as a friend. He stopped poking her and stood waiting. She sighed. "Okay, then. Friends."

"Excellent." Harry grinned. He decided against giving her a hug, even though he really wanted to. He supposed that behavior like that (along with saying things like he thought she was cute, even though honestly he did) would not be a good idea for a while yet. Truthfully there was still a very large part of him that remained rather curious about where they would've ended up if he had not realized he liked Angelina. But all that was past, now. He told her he would see her

later and they were about to part ways when Cho said softly: "She's really pretty..."

"Huh?"

"Angelina." She smiled at him; rather sadly, he thought. "You two make a good couple, and...a-and I'm happy for you, Harry."

He returned her smile. "Cheers."

The air was icy and stung his cheeks as he walked quickly down the winding path that skirted the lake and twisted around near the edge of the forest, hurrying towards the pitch. The castle sank behind the slope of the grounds at his back and he hugged himself, his breath coming out in little misty puffs. The sight of the enormous Quidditch pitch filled Harry with longing as he approached it, and he sniffed a little; his nose was getting numb from the cold. The sky was gray, cloudless, and heavy. He reckoned that snow wasn't too far off. Another few days, at most, and they would be besieged by fat white flakes of the stuff falling upon the waiting earth that he tread now.

Harry saw Angelina, Ginny, Ron, and the rest of the team coming up out of the tunnel that led to the changing rooms towards him when he stepped out onto the pitch. They all looked beat.

"Hey," Angelina called, hoisting her bag back up on her shoulder and smiling wearily at him. Her nose was red from exposure to the icy atmosphere. "You didn't have to come all the way out here."

"No big deal. How was practice?" Harry took her bag from her, even though she didn't ask, and put it over his own shoulder as he fell into step with her and Ron, who was quiet as per usual these days.

"Brutal." Ginny said from behind them. "I swear those Bludgers need to be replaced. The spell on them is so old, they've gone completely crazy. One of them almost took me out halfway through, and no one had touched it."

"Sort of reminded me of that time when you lost your bones, Harry." Angelina added, trying to get the bag back from him. He switched

sides with Ron to keep her away from it. "But Ron here is getting much better at saving goals," she said encouragingly, patting Ron on the back. "Aren't you Ron?"

Ron grunted something that sounded like: "Yeah, sure."

Harry had tucked the book Hermione had given him under his arm, and now he let it slip into his hand as he hoisted Angelina's bag again. "Here..." he said, handing it to her. She frowned and took it, her eyes scanning the cover. He watched her do this, paying particular attention to the small noise she made upon finishing the title.

"Oh. Thanks."

They walked on, Ron falling behind a little and Angelina and Harry taking up the lead. The team members chatted amongst each other behind them. Angelina had opened the book and was skimming the pages carefully, her eyes moving back and forward over the text as she walked alongside Harry.

"Why are you reading about Memory Charms?" he asked her with genuine casualness.

She hesitated before answering him, which he noticed and thought was kind of odd. "No reason, really...just curious. Why?"

Harry looked at her sideways. She was not looking at him, but at the ground that they tread as they walked along, her eyes unfocused as he had seen them so many times before. He shrugged. "Hermione's very excited that you've taken up her nerdy habit of devouring books. Better be careful or she'll be dragging you to the library on your free periods all the time."

"Ah...well, she's been very helpful." Her tone was making him want to ask her more questions. He was feeling a bit like he had weeks ago, when she was always lost in thought. She hadn't been doing this as much lately, but then he understood that this was probably because she was being more careful about behaving like that around him. This did not sit well with him. Harry thought for a split second about Malfoy's scribbled words and he was on the point of asking her what

had triggered her interest in that subject matter, but didn't receive a chance. Angelina had stopped walking suddenly, looking around them as if she were seeing this area of the path back up to the castle for the first time. That was a silly thing to think, though, because they had all walked this way a thousand times before.

"What is it?"

She was staring at a tree; staring at it hard. "Huh?" she asked, distracted. The others caught up to them and stopped, watching Angelina as Harry was with curiosity.

"Hey what's that you're looking at?" Ginny asked.

"Uh...just thought I forgot something down in the changing rooms for a second."

Angelina glanced at Harry before moving on up the path towards the castle, clutching the book tightly against her chest. Harry watched her go, trying to decide if he should be concerned. Everyone moved on as if there was nothing amiss and then Ron came up, his head held low. Harry set aside his curiosity concerning Angelina and watched his friend amble up the path toward him, looking every bit as brooding and miserable as ever. He sighed and fell into step with his friend. Ron barely noticed; he was staring at his feet, seemingly lost in thought. They made it all the way back up to the front steps of the castle in silence before Harry hoisted Angelina's bag up again and stopped walking.

"Hey, Ron, wait a sec."

"What?" Ron turned to face him, one foot on a stone step, his shoulders hunched and his red hair in his eyes. His expression was dark.

Harry gave a sigh. "You're still mad at me, aren't you?"

"Why would I be mad at you?"

"I promised to help you figure out this Hermione thing and I just left you hanging, I'm sorry."

Ron stared at him for a bit, but shrugged somberly and turned to finish the ascent to the front doors. "Doesn't matter..." he muttered over his shoulder. Harry caught up with him, somewhat encumbered by Angelina's heavy bag.

"Yes, it does."

"Harry, really, I don't wanna talk about it, okay?" Ron said flatly, not looking at him.

"Ron, you've been sulking--!"

"I do not sulk, Harry!"

Harry bit back his retort and nodded. "Okay, you don't sulk, but you've been acting all cranky for a long time and it's driving me crazy. You've got to get out of this rut and just tell her you like her."

"I did!" Ron snapped, causing several people to stare at them. They stopped just outside the doors to the Great Hall.

"No, you sprung a big kiss on her in front of Luna of all people right before a match."

Ron gritted his teeth. "Well it didn't do any good, all right, she ran away from me so I—don't—wanna—talk about it."

He turned and stomped into the Great Hall without another word, leaving Harry to drag Angelina's heavy bag in by himself. Ron sat with Seamus and Dean down on Fred and George's end of the table for dinner. Hermione tried to act as if she didn't notice, but her conversation was a bit wooden and she struggled through the entire meal trying to seem oblivious to Ron's brooding form down the table.

"How're you finding your reading on Memory Charms, Angelina?" she asked the seventh year when they were starting dessert, trying and failing to sound casual and not at all concerned with Ron's behavior.

She took a bite of strawberry shortcake, her eyes flickering down towards his end before returning to Angelina. Harry watched Angelina gulp down a huge swig of pumpkin juice before shrugging quickly.

"Oh, fine. Thanks for the book," she said dismissively, not looking at Harry.

"Okay, that's it." Both Hermione and Angelina raised their eyebrows at his sharp tone. "What's going on with you?"

Before Angelina could answer him, Fred tossed a sugar biscuit down the table that landed in Harry's custard pie.

"Oi, Harry!" the Weasley twin hissed.

Harry looked up and saw both Fred and George giving him quite meaningful looks. Angelina frowned at him, but he only shrugged. Fred gestured behind him, where the Slytherin table was. Malfoy was sitting with his usual flank of cronies, chewing lazily. Fred picked up the biscuit platter and gave Harry a thumbs up. Harry watched Fred stand with the biscuit platter and saunter over to the Slytherin table.

"What's he doing?" Angelina asked skeptically, watching her friend walk across the Great Hall towards Malfoy.

"I think he wants a trade," Harry said, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

Indeed, Fred stopped just beside Malfoy with the platter. By now several people at the Gryffindor table had their heads turned in his direction, also wondering what on earth was going on. Malfoy looked up at Fred and his eyes shrank with loathing. "Lose your way, Weasel?" he sneered silkily. "The pathetic losers' table is in the opposite direction."

"Pipe down Malfoy," Fred said dismissively, leaning over the boy's head to squint at the dessert platters on their table. "I just wanted to...ah...here it is. I hate sugar biscuits and I know these two knobs'll eat anything, so I fancied a trade." He indicated Crabbe and Goyle as he sat his platter on the table and picked up a platter piled with

brownies. Before Malfoy could open his mouth to insult him again, he waved casually and sang “Tata, enjoy the biscuits, boys.” The lot of them stared at him as he walked cheerfully back over to the Gryffindor table. He picked up a brownie, bit into it, and wiggled his eyebrows at Harry. “Yummy...” he mumbled through a full mouth.

Harry thought this had been the most obvious display ever. If Malfoy took one of those biscuits, which he probably would not, then whatever happened to him would be a direct result of something Fred and George had done to them and Umbridge or whoever else would see right through that. Harry turned back to the Slytherin table. Malfoy had pushed the platter away with disgust and Crabbe and Goyle were looking at it as if they really, really wanted to eat a biscuit but wouldn’t dare.

“That was weird...” Angelina said, turning her skeptical gaze again to him. Harry could only nod in agreement. He waited until Angelina and the others had returned to their dessert before looking over at the twins again. They were eating their brownies, seemingly very pleased with themselves.

“What was that?” he mouthed when he caught George’s gaze.

“Just wait...” George mouthed back.

Harry ate, his mind buzzing with anticipation. What would happen? Would Malfoy suddenly turn into a jackass in the middle of all these other students? Would he crumble into a fit of giggles until his face turned blue? As Harry finished his pie, he chanced another glance at the Slytherin table and saw, to his extreme intrigue, that Malfoy was reaching over to the biscuit platter. He stopped chewing, his mouth falling open slightly as he watched, unable to help himself. Angelina saw him staring and turned around too.

Malfoy did not draw his hand back holding a sugar biscuit, but a small white piece of parchment folded in half. Harry watched as the other boy opened the note and read it, his lips moving faintly and his brow furrowing. When he had finished, he looked up sharply, his eyes landing right on Harry’s.

Harry knew he should be looking serious and threatening just then, because it seemed quite clear that Fred had slipped the note for Malfoy to open and that it contained an invitation for a duel.

Malfoy's eyes were burning into him; so Harry closed his mouth, swallowed his pie, and glared right back. The Slytherin boy's expression was blank, but his eyes conveyed all the same feelings of loathing for Harry that Harry held for him. Then he moved his gaze, for a split second, from Harry to Angelina. She reacted by abruptly turning around to her plate again.

"What was that look?" Harry asked her, turning away too.

"What was that note?" Angelina whispered to him.

He couldn't answer. Hermione and Ginny were staring at them. "I don't know..." he lied.

"Well, it certainly was strange," Hermione said skeptically, eyeing Harry. "That is the first time I've ever seen Fred go over there. Are they up to something, Harry?"

Harry saw them all looking at him and reacted almost instinctively; his brain telling him to protect the knowledge of what was going on from them because they did not understand. "Not that I'm aware of."

Ginny scoffed but remained silent. After a few minutes, Harry had busied himself taking cherries from a bowl near him and popping them in his mouth. He could feel Ginny's stare on the side of his face, making the minuscule hairs stand up. Angelina was looking down the table at Fred and George, who were still eating brownies and acting as if nothing was nothing.

Just then Filch came in; his crooked saunter faster than usual. He passed them and they all turned to watch him make his way over to the staff table, where he stopped next to Umbridge and bent as low as his rheumatism would allow to whisper something in her ear. Harry heard someone clearing their throat faintly behind him and knew that it was either Fred or George. Sure enough, Umbridge was smiling

now as if Filch had just told her she'd won a thousand Galleons and was getting up from the staff table to follow him.

Harry watched as the two of them advanced, momentarily apprehensive that they were coming for him. They bypassed the Gryffindor table, however, and Umbridge walked straight up to Draco. He was still clutching the note in his hand. He looked up at her skeptically and Harry imaged he was trying to decide if she was going to pin a medal on him right there in front of everybody and name him her Head Sneak or if he was in trouble.

"Malfoy, would you kindly step out with me, please?" she purred.

Draco's eyes narrowed and he asked boldly: "What for?"

"On yer feet, boy." Filch rasped. "You heard the Professor."

Harry watched Draco's eyes flicker toward the staff table for some reason. Then the cold blue gaze of his enemy landed on him again for a split second before he crushed the parchment Fred had given him in his palm and stood up. Harry kept his watch on the three of them until they were out of sight through the doors and then quickly turned to the staff table where Draco had looked. He scanned the seats, coming to one teacher's face after the other, until he found Snape. The Potions Master was staring down the path to the doors of the Great Hall quite intensely.

He turned to find Fred and George with expressions of roguish ecstasy on their freckled faces.

"Looks like we're about to see the arrival of another decree from hell," Ginny muttered bitterly.

Hermione sighed. "That's it, then. We've got to take more precautions with the D.A. now that Malfoy's getting what he wanted."

Harry said nothing. Neither did Angelina. She looked very grave.

The crowd moving through towards the exit at dinner's end seemed especially dense tonight. Harry had stolen a few looks over at the

Slytherins to see if Malfoy had told any of them about the note. No one was doing anything out of the ordinary; Crabbe and Goyle were shuffling along several people behind him, not looking angry or riled up, but stuffed from eating too much as usual. Angelina squeezed his arm and he turned back to face her.

"Tell me the truth, Harry, what was that note about?"

"How should I know?" was his elusive response.

"Come off it. Fred clearly wanted you to see what he did. And Draco looked right at you when he read it. Tell me what it said."

Harry considered her for a moment and then shook his head. "No, you tell me why you're acting weird again. What was so special about that tree you were staring at on our way back from the pitch? And how come you're reading up on memory alteration?"

She didn't answer him right away, which was an ominous sight in of itself. When she did speak her voice was diminished again as it had been the night they argued in the little corridor. "I'm...I think I've...I can't tell you."

Harry sighed deeply. The two of them were merely being shuffled along by the other moving students, and didn't seem to be aware of anyone but each other as their gazes stayed locked. Harry moved his feet but his mind remained on his girlfriend, who looked very distressed to him right then. "Angelina, tell me what's wrong."

Her distress melted and was replaced by frustration. "You tell me what you and the twins are up to!"

They had reached the open doorway and almost come to a stand-still when Harry saw Draco out of the corner of his eye. He was standing with Umbridge at the threshold of the great oak doors, looking very trapped. Suddenly the twins were on either side of Harry, nudging him in the ribs. "They're waiting for him to come up, I'll bet." Fred whispered.

"Perfect timing," George added. "Bloody perfect! We didn't expect him to arrive so soon. Oh, this is meant to be, Harry!"

"What are you talking about?" Angelina demanded.

She was joined by Ginny and Hermione, and hovering nearby was Ron looking very attentive despite his pining demeanor. Harry opened his mouth but it was Fred who answered. "Nothing for you to worry about, Angie."

"Oh really?" Angelina glared at the three of them, crossing her arms. "Well you'd better tell me, now, or I'm marching straight over there to Umbridge and--!"

"You won't do any such thing, Johnson." George said seriously.

"Harry..." Hermione spoke, looking very concerned. "What's going on?"

"Leave them alone, Hermione." Again Harry was prevented from speaking; this time by Ron. His voice was very quiet, but forbidding, and he stared at the girls as if he would have no protest from them whatsoever. The severity of his gaze, coupled with the suddenness of hearing him actually speak more than two words clearly to them after so long, even made Angelina blanch. She uncrossed her arms slowly. "Come on, or we'll be late," he said, referring to the D.A. meeting they were to have tonight. He gave Harry a look that said fill me in later and turned to walk up the steps, his hands in his pockets and his red hair falling into his eyes again. Ginny and Hermione turned to follow him silently. Angelina glared at Harry and the twins some more, then her gaze shifted to Malfoy and Umbridge again.

"Fine," she relented after a beat of watching the teacher and her captive. Harry wanted very much to follow her up the stairs and demand that she do some explaining of her own, but just then the great oak doors opened and Lucius Malfoy stepped in from the cold, the sterling silver snake's head topping his long black cane glinting in the light of the chandelier.

The students still filing out of the Great Hall turned their heads to peer at the new arrival, some murmuring amongst themselves. Harry, Fred, and George found themselves being surveyed stonily by the tall, white-blond haired man draped in black. His lip curled up upon sight of Harry but then his gaze fell on Draco.

Harry had never seen the elder Malfoy look so threatening, except maybe that time he accidentally set Dobby free.

"Ah, Lucius Malfoy, so good of you to take time out of your busy schedule to join me for a conference this evening," Umbridge simpered, though Lucius did not take his shining eyes off of his son. "As you've already read in my letter, I've been subjected to quite inappropriate behavior from your son, and I thought it was high time that you and I--"

"Yes, well if you don't mind, Delores, I would prefer it if we could carry this conversation to a more private location." Lucius interrupted her, his silky voice cutting across her gravely and his cold blue eyes flashing.

Umbridge stammered on her words a bit, but recovered. "Yes. Of course..." she said evenly.

Draco was almost visibly shaking with what looked to Harry like anger—perhaps he was angry that he was so scared? Or angry that his father had come to humiliate him in front of Umbridge after he had so boldly tried to intimidate her with his childish threats? Or...was he angry about the note that Fred had given him? Harry could not peel his eyes away from the scene. He secretly hoped for the kind of whimpering, cringing display of fear Draco had shown on several other occasions over the years.

"Potter! Weasley's! Stop your gawking; get upstairs and to your dorms this instant! One second behind curfew and that's thirty points from Gryffindor!" Snape's harsh voice invaded Harry's thoughts and he turned sharply to see the Potions Master angrily striding towards them from the Great Hall. Fred and George sauntered away and up the stairs. Harry reluctantly turned to follow them. Snape scowled at him before sweeping past the stairs and heading towards Umbridge

and the Malfoy's. Harry heard over his shoulder as he walked a little too slowly behind the twins: "Lucius, what brings you to Hogwarts so late?"

"I was delayed at the Ministry, Severus, but my business here does not concern you I'm afraid," came elder Malfoy's calculated reply. "I am here to have a conference with Professor Umbridge about my...son." The word 'son' was spoken with thinly-veiled repugnance.

"I see..." came Snape's quiet reply. "Well. Do, if you have time, stop by the dungeons when your conference is over?"

"If I have time, Severus."

"If you'll excuse us, Professor Snape?" Umbridge spoke impatiently.

"Very well."

Harry almost tripped over a step, he was listening so hard. Once he knew the conversation was over, he sprinted up the remaining steps to find the twins up ahead ambling down the corridor. "Hey!" he called after them.

"What'd we miss?" they chimed without hesitation as he fell into step with them. He filled them in on what he had heard; they all three broke into sprints up to their floor, talking excitedly. The twins beamed and gave each other high fives. "Yes! Right about now they're going up to Umbridge's office to rake that little sod over the coals but good!" Fred whispered evilly.

"But what about your note?" Harry asked nervously as they entered the common room. "I mean, what if he lets them see it or they notice he's got it? What if he denies ever writing that threat to Umbridge?" He was becoming anxious and a little frightened by the shrill excitement pumping through him.

"Be easy, lad. This plan is fool-proof," was Fred's calm answer. "I knew that when Daddy Malfoy walked in right on cue! Did ya see that? Bloody brilliant, that was."

"Yes, but we have to make sure!" Harry said impatiently, despite himself. He had been sucked into their plan, and he didn't want to see it fail now, he realized.

"So, go..." came a quiet voice from the stairs leading to the boys' dorms. They turned to see Ron coming down, wearing his regular robes and carrying his wand. "Get your Invisibility Cloak and head them off before they get to Umbridge's office."

Harry blinked at his friend, setting aside his surprise at the sudden appearance and the nonchalance of the suggestion. "Too late, probably. They've made it there by now."

"Then listen at the door, but if you hear them mention the note then you'll have to come up with some kind of diversion or something so you can get it back before they see it."

Harry shook his head, perplexed. "Ron, don't you even want to know what this is about?"

"You guys running a game on Malfoy?" Harry and the twins nodded. "Then I don't need to know the details right now. Hurry up, Harry."

Without hesitation, Harry sped up to his room, fetched his cloak and his Marauder's Map, and zoomed back down into the common room again. He was about to ask what in bloody hell he would use as a distraction when George said: "Think fast, Harry!" before throwing a small object at him. Harry caught it and discovered that it was a bluish-black chew labeled "#307."

"What about the D.A. meeting? I'm the teacher, I can't be late."

"Just say Filch stopped you and you had to stall him for a while, now get your arse in gear or you'll miss them." Ron said, shooing him out through the portrait hole when he had thrown on the Invisibility Cloak.

"I want everyone to start learning how to shield themselves, okay? You know, like I showed you and Hermione?" Harry hissed from under the cloak as they parted ways.

"Fine, fine..." Ron uttered, actually smiling for the first time in weeks. He waved his hand at what he thought was Harry. "Go!"

Harry heard Fred say to his little brother: "You'll never guess what we did...it's bloody brilliant, it is..." as he made his way towards the corridor leading down to Umbridge's office.

"The matter isn't simply that he chose to threaten me for his own gain, Mr. Malfoy. It is the blatant disrespect he has shown in doing so. I simply cannot have any student of mine, however respectable a family they come from, show such petty disregard for authority in my school."

Lucius took a moment to slide his lips up into a curious smile, his eyebrows rising slightly along with them. "Your school, is it, Delores?" he uttered from his sitting position across from her at her desk. His gloved fingers played with the silver snake's head that topped his cane. "My, my, we are ambitious."

"Ahem," she cleared her throat and her eyes flickered pointedly to Draco, who was sitting next to his father, his fist tightly clenched at his side and his eyes staring straight ahead at nothing. "Ambition has nothing to do with it. This boy tried to blackmail me, Lucius," she said to him, dropping all pretence. "Now what are you going to do about it?"

"Draco knows that he crossed a line," Lucius responded coldly. "And he will be punished accordingly."

"By whom? You?" Umbridge said as if she found something funny.

"Oh yes..." sighed Lucius quite forebodingly. Draco stirred in his seat but said nothing. There was silence for a moment, in which the full weight of the elder Malfoy's statement could be felt. Many sinister things could be discerned from what he said, and judging by the boy's colorless face and vacant eyes, one could guess that Lucius had the means and the will to punish his son very severely.

"Well," chirped Delores, breaking the heavy silence. "All the same, I will of course be carrying out my own punishment."

Lucius inclined his head slightly. "If you wish." He turned to his son and pointed his cane in the direction of the door to the office. "Draco, leave us. I want to have a word with Professor Umbridge alone."

"Yes, father." Draco clenched his jaw and stood up to leave the room.

"Do not stray, Draco. I want to speak with you as well before I leave."

Trying not to let the cold fear wash over him completely, Draco opened the door and stepped out.

When he was gone Lucius leaned forward and surveyed Delores with unadorned disdain. "Would you mind explaining to me just how in hell you let a fifteen-year-old boy to get the better of you?" he spat, his blue eyes flashing again.

Delores smiled sweetly, her own eyes hard with coldness. "I did no such thing," she replied as though his tone did little to affect her. "You're the one, Lucius, who has been foolish. How on earth did that boy come to find out about our arrangement?"

"Well, Draco is resourceful." He smiled somewhat whimsically, "Seems we've both underestimated him on that count. He takes after me in that way, I suppose. I assure you anything he found out did not come from my lips."

"Well, that is beside the point, isn't it? He knows, and he threatened to go to the Minister!"

Lucius scoffed at her, leaning back in the chair again. "Do you really think that anyone at the Ministry would hold stock in anything a child has to say?"

"Oh wouldn't they? Have you forgotten why I came you in the first place? I have had quite a task in keeping that awful little Potter boy's lies from spreading without having to deal with your 'child's' threats to destroy everything I've worked to accomplish!"

Lucius sneered at her. "The Potter brat and my son should not be compared, ever. Understood?"

They regarded each other sourly for a beat.

"He must not repeat what he knows to anyone, Lucius." Umbridge dropped her simpering tone and her smile faded to a tight frown, such was the gravity of what she was saying. "If the Minister found out that I ordered Dementors after Potter, everything will be ruined and we will both have to answer for it."

"Since it was I that arranged their cooperation with you, I dare say I am well aware of the consequences..." Lucius said stiffly in response. "Do not assume for a second that I will let that happen."

"Then we understand each other."

"Quite clearly, it seems."

"Good." She rose from her desk and he followed suit, taking up his cane and obliging her with a curt bow before turning and sweeping his robes up. He strode across the office to the door, where he turned and surveyed his surroundings with a disapproving eye.

"You know, I do believe I understand now why you find it hard for these students to take you seriously, Delores. These...kittens and this...pink lace everywhere?"

"What about them?" she ventured stiffly.

"Come now, Delores..." the man scoffed at her callously. "You are an adult, aren't you?"

"Good night to you, Lucius!"

His mouth slanted into a superior smile. "Good night."

He left her fuming at her desk, her frolicking kitten plates suddenly seeming vulgar to her beady eyes.

Chapter Twenty-One: Dueling in the Halls

Harry stepped back quickly when the door to the office opened and Draco emerged looking even whiter than usual.

Under the cloak Harry breathed silently, watching Draco take a few steps down the hall and then turn back, his eyes moving all around him, as if searching for an invisible helping hand to swoop in and save him. He looked panic-stricken.

"Think, you idiot, think! Tell him any excuse!" he hissed to himself, still clutching the note Fred had given him in his fist. Harry eyed the boy for a moment without sympathy and then heard the voices of Lucius and Delores drifting out to him faintly. He turned and resumed his position at the door, straining to hear. He was aware of Draco pacing behind him, but knew that if he remained perfectly still he would not be discovered.

"The Potter brat and my son should not be compared, ever. Understood?" came Lucius' cutting voice. There was a long pause of silence in which the sounds of Draco's frantic mutterings distracted Harry. He licked his lips and blocked them out.

"He must not repeat what he knows to anyone Lucius." Umbridge said finally. "If the Minister finds out that I sent Dementors after Potter, everything will be ruined and we will both have to answer for it."

Harry's Adam's apple slipped down into his stomach and he could feel himself going numb all over. So! It had been that evil bitch that sent those Dementors to Privet Drive! To what? To kill him? To incapacitate him and drag him away from his fat cousin off to Azkaban to rot while she and the Minister ousted Dumbledore and corrupted Hogwarts as they pleased? The numbness burned hot and Harry thought about punching a hole in the door, but he did not wish to be discovered eavesdropping just then, so he decided against it.

"Since it was I that arranged their cooperation with you, I dare say I am well aware of the consequences..." Lucius was saying silkily. Harry heard Draco moving about again and turned carefully to watch him.

Your father and you are a rotten pair of scum, he thought bitterly, staring at Draco and loving the petrified look on his pale face. A second later he heard Lucius utter 'Goodnight' and the door was opening. Again Harry stepped back quickly, his heart thumping mercilessly with an odd mixture of anger, excitement, and apprehension. Draco's eyes were wide and shining; his body went rigid as a board when he saw his father emerge slowly from the office, closing the door behind him without any hurry. Harry watched, standing dangerously close to the pair, trying to block out the loud drumming of his heart.

"Draco..." Lucius uttered; the softness of his voice so much more terrifying than all the yelling Uncle Vernon had ever done. "You've embarrassed me."

"Father," Draco's voice was not nearly as snide or superior as it usually was. "I-I didn't mean to--"

"Silence!" Harry jumped at the sudden stab of anger elder Malfoy's voice delivered. The cloak fluttered but neither father nor son seemed to notice. "Need I remind you that your stupidity could cost us everything? Do you have any idea what could happen if anyone found out that I had anything to do with that Dementor attack? Do you?"

"I was never going to tell! I just wanted--"

"Wanted what, exactly, my idiot son?" Lucius sneered menacingly. "Hmmm? Do you think this is a silly little game? Do you think threatening people to gain some meaningless authority at this disgrace for a wizarding school is worth risking our livelihood?"

"But it's Potter, Father! He's in my face all the time and I wanted to shut him up!" Draco almost whined. Harry was sweating and his arms were growing tired from holding the cloak away from his eyes so he could see clearly. The sight of Draco sniveling at his father's reproach was almost too much for him to handle.

Lucius grimaced with disgust, apparently feeling the same way. "Stop your whining, you useless boy! Potter is nothing more than a brat, and he's got a mark on him that will soon end his pitiful existence, do you understand? You waste your time playing childish games! If you want to do something useful, you watch me and learn what it means to truly matter! Because in the long run, none of these fools will live to see--!"

"You mean working for You-Know-Who?" Draco interrupted nervously.
"Am I going to be a...a...?"

"You stammer, Draco." Lucius only said coldly. "No wonder Potter feels he can bully you."

"He does not bully me! I'm the one with the upper hand here!" The boy had finally gotten angry and was now glaring at his father, despite his trembling fists at his sides. Harry felt like he was trapped between a snake and a rat and the rat was about to get eaten...

"Oh?" Lucius' eyebrows rose up with amusement. "And how is that? You obviously felt you needed help from a teacher to get to him. That doesn't sound like the action of one who has the 'upper hand' as you put it. It sounds marvelously like he's backed you into a corner and you ran to Umbridge like the child you are."

"I am not a child!"

"Then prove it and stop your excuses! You are a Malfoy! Act as such!" Again, they glared at each other for a long moment. Harry knew that he should be going—he had to get to the D.A. meeting. But it was so hard for him to turn away. He was eating it up. The twins were geniuses; this was playing out exactly as they had planned it; almost too perfectly. Then suddenly and to Harry's horror, Draco thrust the crumpled note at his father, his eyes blazing with defiance.
"What is this, boy?"

"He's challenged me to a duel." Draco growled. Lucius opened the note and read over it quickly, his lips curling up into one of those trademark Malfoy smiles. Harry felt as if his blood were frozen. This could not be good. They were standing a little ways off from the office,

but Umbridge could still come out at any moment and then what? Would they show her the note? He tried to ease his hand down to this pocket, where the chew #307 was tucked. He didn't have any clue what he was going to do with it but he had to think of something. He was about to close his fingers around it when he saw Lucius hand the note back to Draco, still smiling.

"You will accept, of course."

Harry's mouth fell open.

Draco hesitated for a moment, his chest rising and falling still from the yelling he had done. "O-Of course."

"You stammered again. I'm afraid with that sort of resolve you cannot hope to redeem yourself, Draco."

"Father, I said I will accept the damned challenge." Draco uttered quietly, his voice echoing some of his father's earlier menace.

Lucius regarded his son much the same as he had done Umbridge's office for a moment, his blue eyes glinting in the small light of the torches lining the hall. Then abruptly he stepped forward and slapped the boy across the face, hard. Draco faltered under the blow, but stood still again quickly, his expression filled with restrained animosity. "I used my hand...but next time I will use my wand and it will hurt far worse." Draco did not look up at his father, but stared right through Harry down the dark corridor, his hand rubbing his rapidly flushing cheek. "Do not ever attempt something so idiotic again, am I making myself clear?"

"Yes, father."

"You will submit to that horrid woman's punishment without a word, and when you return to the estate for the holidays you will find me a very poor host. I trust you understand that this doesn't end here. In order to keep the sort of company that I do on a daily basis, you must learn your place."

"Yes, sir..." Draco's gaze, if made of fire, would have burnt Harry's cloak to ash at this point. Lucius clicked his tongue disappointedly at his son and gathered his robes to walk off again. "Are you going to tell Uncle Severus what I did?" Draco asked quietly.

Lucius paused on the steps near Harry, his back to them both. "You are too old to still be using that nickname, and this is hardly the place for it." He lifted his head and turned slightly to regard Draco again. "Do not be foolish. If I told Severus, he would ask questions and questions are never good. You'll apologize to him for me, but I am not stopping to speak with him."

Both Harry and Draco silently watched Lucius leave their midst without another word.

Then Draco did something that alarmed Harry: he turned and stared directly at him. The boy's gaze did burn through the cloak and he uttered bitterly: "Did you enjoy that, then?"

Harry was about to retreat, his disbelief so strong that Draco knew he was there, but then he realized that Draco wasn't looking at him, but through him at someone behind him in the dark corridor. He turned around as carefully and silently as he could and saw a figure draped in shadow. The figure stood there silently for a long pause, and then finally spoke.

"Like father, like son I see."

Harry froze. It was Angelina speaking, and her voice was trembling so, so slightly...it disturbed him even more than the shock of seeing her there. She stepped under the light of one of the torches, looking every bit as grave and intense as she had been the day she told them that her playbook was stolen. He didn't know what to do with himself. Many, many questions swarmed about inside his head. Why was she here? Did she follow him? Had she been eavesdropping? Why wasn't she at the meeting with the others?

Draco's hostile voice shattered his thoughts. "Piss off, Johnson. Run, go tell your boyfriend I accept his stupid challenge. He'll be sorry he ever messed with me."

“What challenge?” Harry backed up and flattened himself against a wall as Draco extended the arm holding the note in her direction. She squinted at it uncertainly, but then stepped forward several paces until she was close enough to reach out and take it. Harry held his breath, reeling from so many emotions coursing through him as he watched his girlfriend; who was supposed to be at the D.A. meeting and who was now talking to Draco Malfoy of all people as if they shared a secret; read over the note the twins had written. She was standing inches from him and he saw her eyes narrow in the dim light. “A duel? On the Quidditch pitch. This isn’t serious.”

“Guess he didn’t tell you.” Draco reached out for the note, but she withdrew it from him, her gaze burrowing into him hard. “I’ll have it back now...” he said, matching her look.

“Explain to me first why you told Harry that you and I have been having fun together,” she whispered malevolently. Draco’s arm was still reaching out for the note, and he stared at her but said nothing. “Explain to me, Malfoy, why I have been having dreams about you--”

“Ha!” He laughed nervously, lowering his hand and adopting a look of arrogance. “It’s not my fault you’re having dreams about me, Johnson. Perhaps you should tell your little Pottykins; bet he’d love to hear that!”

Harry did not like hearing this. His jaw felt as if it was made of steel.

“Do not play games with me!” Angelina shouted, her chest heaving. “I’ve been having dreams, and seeing things, and remembering you—you pointing your wand at me! And nothing else! Now what did you do to me?”

“Who says I did anything?” Malfoy looked perhaps a bit too stiff and guilty just then. Harry wanted to grab him by his neck and squeeze, but he had to hear. He had to find out what they would say next.

Angelina narrowed her eyes at him. “You did. Bragging to Harry was not smart. He came straight to me. He wanted to kill you, and I would have let him if I weren’t afraid...”

"Afraid of what?" Draco's smile broke through his apprehensive expression and he stepped forward, towards Angelina. It was all Harry could do not to throw the cloak off of himself. "Afraid that you liked it as much as I did?"

"What...?" Angelina gasped.

Just then the door to Umbridge's office creaked and Draco grabbed Angelina and pulled her back around the same corner that Harry had hidden behind when he overheard the blackmail attempt. Harry remained where he was, though his mind screamed at him to follow them, until Umbridge had come out. She closed the door and locked it, turning to go in the opposite direction from him as she'd done last time. He waited until she was around another far away corner before he removed himself from the wall and followed Draco and Angelina.

He found them mere feet away when he turned the corner again. They had been waiting for Umbridge, too, he could see. His insides boiled as he surveyed Draco pressed against her, listening.

"She's gone..." the other boy confirmed, and seconds later Angelina had pushed him off of her.

"Spill it, Malfoy!" she hissed.

"Give me that back." Draco ignored her demand and reached out again for the note in her hand. She balled it up and threw it at him. Draco flinched; the motion was barely visible in the dim light but Harry saw it. Harry also saw that Angelina's slight tremble was becoming rather visible shaking. She swallowed and looked around; her eyes passing over him for a fleeting second; as though trying to make sure that they would not be overheard. Draco merely stood there, watching her.

"Listen to me," she began. "I know you did something. Denying it won't do any good, Malfoy, so just tell me now."

"Why?" he spat. "So you can run to McGonagall and get me expelled? You don't remember anything, do you?"

“I remember enough!”

Again, Draco stepped towards her and despite himself Harry took a step, too. He had momentarily forgotten that he was under the cloak and was therefore invisible to both of them but he swore to himself that if Malfoy touched her again the cloak would not matter. His brain was acting funny – on the one hand he wanted nothing more than to blast Malfoy’s fingers off one by one with his wand, but on the other his curiosity was stronger than ever and it was working furiously to piece things together. Done something to her—done something? “You think he raped me?” Angelina had gasped to him in that little corridor. These things blinked in his brain like flickering candlelight, and Harry’s heart thump-thump-thumped in his chest like a hammer trying to break through. He stood there listening, waiting. All Malfoy had to do was say it and it would be all over for him. Harry might just end up in Azkaban after all.

“You used a Memory Charm on me, didn’t you, you little snake?” Her eyes were glistening with restrained emotion. “What did you do? Follow me when I was alone after Quidditch practice? Were you looking for my playbook?”

“No, I wasn’t looking for your playbook...” Draco whispered, looking very intense and not at all as snide as he should have.

“But you did put your hands on me, didn’t you?”

“No...”

“Then explain my wrists! Explain why I was dirty, and w-why I had to wash the leaves out of my hair, a-and...” Angelina’s glistening eyes were spilling over, now, her face stricken with confused anger. Harry couldn’t move, he couldn’t think. He could only listen. And watch—like Muggles stop to watch people being rescued from a burning building or slow their cars down at the scene of an accident to crane their necks. “Draco...did you...did you r-ra--?”

“No!” Malfoy looked as if he’d been slapped again. Harry had never seen him so vulnerable-looking; not even in the presence of his father.

He had no sympathy. “Don’t you say that! Don’t you say that to anyone, you hear?”

A single tear ran slowly down her soft cheek, catching the light from the torch a few feet away from her. Angelina wiped it away and breathed in deeply, staring him down. “The Memory Charm. It backfired on you...”

“What?” He grimaced at her cold statement, watching her apprehensively for a split second before masking his face again with his usual expression of malevolence. “What do you mean?”

“I told you—I’ve been having dreams. Little things are starting to come back to me, Malfoy. There was a tree...do you remember that? You had me pinned against a tree.” She was advancing on him, backing him up to the other end of the hall. They were almost to the wall. “Do you remember?”

“Angelina...” Draco said her first name for the first time in Harry’s recollection. “Listen. I don’t think you get it. Okay, I did not mean to hurt you. I like you. I-I really--”

“What else did you do to me?” she hissed.

“Wouldn’t you like to know...” he uttered nastily, all traces of remorse vanishing.

“Your lies won’t stop me from knowing the truth eventually, Malfoy.” Angelina, ignoring his last statement, had backed him against the wall and was now poking him in the shoulder threateningly. “When I finally piece this together I’m going to find a way to nail you, and you will get what you deserve!”

She was on the point of turning around and leaving him standing there when he grabbed her and spun her back towards him with such swift force that it made Harry start. “Oh you think so? You just try it, then Johnson!”

But she was quick, as well, and her hands were all over him hitting and pushing as she beat him about the head, ruffling his white-blond hair. "I will! I hope Harry blasts you to dust!"

Harry had seen enough. He wanted—but he couldn't let Malfoy know about the Invisibility Cloak. Quick as lightening he backed around a corner and whipped off the cloak. He had pulled his wand out of his pocket as he rounded it again, just as Angelina tore herself from Draco's hold on her. She was walking away, now, but when she spotted him standing there she froze, her eyes going wide and her mouth dropping open. Draco stopped too, staring at Harry coldly and without much surprise.

"Potter."

Harry, despite the overwhelming anger pulsing through him, took the time to speak clearly and evenly. "Angelina," he said, not taking his eyes off of Malfoy. "Get out of here. Go back." He didn't have to say "...to the Room of Requirement."

She looked as if she wanted to protest, her eyes glistening again as she took a shaky step towards him, but his gaze landed on her and she closed her mouth. Angelina backed away slowly for a few paces, then turned on her heel and ran. He watched her go feeling so, so hot all over.

"I told you..." Malfoy was leering, now. "We have fun."

Harry's red light turned on again behind his eyes and he drove himself bodily into the other boy, knocking him against the wall. Draco slipped off his feet and fell on his bum; Harry heaving like an enraged troll above him, his wand pointed. "You say another word and I'll kill you!"

Draco glared up at him for a moment. Then as if he could not help himself from testing Harry's threat, he opened his mouth to speak—that smile was playing at his lips again. "She's quite the--"

Harry forgot his wand and shot his fist out, abruptly putting an end to Draco's words. When the other boy's head came up again his lip was

stained with blood. Harry breathed at him, rage welling up and up inside him, shaking his head slightly as if to say come on...

Draco considered the look in Harry's eyes with his fingers held to his bleeding lip, and then he propelled himself up from the floor, tackling Harry with brutal force and surprising strength. The two boys fell to the slippery floor in a heap of struggling limbs; Harry's wand was knocked out of his hand but that only freed it for punching. They rolled around for a bit on the smooth surface, grunting roughly in the quiet of the dark corridor as each tried to gain the upper hand over the other. Nothing moved but the two lumpy shadows of these boys as they twisted each other's arms back and kneed each other in the stomach and pulled each other's hair and punched each other. Harry's glasses went sliding away, and he twirled himself around on his belly to retrieve them, receiving an elbow in the back for the trouble.

He snarled and whipped his hand back wildly. It landed right across Draco's now thrice-abused cheek and the boy collapsed on his butt again, allowing Harry to grab up his glasses and jump to his feet. He reached down immediately and took hold of Draco by the collar, pulling him up roughly and slamming him against the wall again.

Draco slapped his hand away and tried to punch him, but Harry ducked out of the way. He ran for his wand and picked it up, reeling around just in time to find that Draco had whipped his out as well. They stood aiming at each other, their chests rising and falling heavily, their hair wild on their heads. Draco's cloak was hanging sloppily off of himself. Harry had stuffed his as far as it would go in his back pocket, but it had been loosened in the fight and was now somewhere on the floor. He did not care just then. Draco licked the blood from his aching lip and scoffed. "Shall we duel here, then Potter?"

"I'm going to fucking murder you, Malfoy!" Harry spat furiously.

"Why?" Draco was doing a marvelous job of hiding his fear behind a sly smile. "Because your girlfriend has dreams about me? Jealous, Pott--?"

“Diffindo!” Harry’s wand shot forth a jet of yellow light that narrowly missed Draco’s head. The curtains on the window behind him fluttered violently and tore in the middle as the spell bounced off them and hit the polished floor, making a small dent in the unblemished surface.

“Reducto!” Draco countered, and Harry ducked out of the way, just in time to see the banister on the staircase behind him explode to dust, leaving a giant gap. He was on his feet again in a flash, about to hit Draco with another spell, but just then he heard shuffling feet and keys jangling.

“I’ll hang ya by yer thumbs, you little beasts!” It was Filch. “I’ll skin ya alive!”

While Harry was distracted by Filch’s angry rasping, Draco made a run for it, dodging up the set of stairs on his end of the hall and out of sight. Harry felt his anger propel him forward as he broke into a run after the other boy. He skidded around the banister and shot up two steps at a time on Draco’s heels. He caught up to Draco easily and aimed his wand, shooting a spell at his head that narrowly missed and instead reduced a nearby marble bust to chunky gray fragments on its perch. Draco aimed a spell behind him and Harry ducked out of the way, hearing the floor crack open as he pumped his legs harder in the chase. He caught up to Draco and slapped him across the back of the head. Draco shoved Harry sideways into a wall and headed for another set of stairs. Harry followed, and the chase went on with them shooting hastily aimed spells at each other, not stopping until they were both two floors up, still hearing Filch’s faint cursing. They stood in the darkness of an empty classroom, panting as they caught their breath. Draco wiped irritably at the cut on his lip from Harry’s earlier blow, spitting blood on the floor and growling under his breath.

“This is going to cost you Potter,” he whispered, still wary of Filch.

“Shut your filthy mouth.” Harry stood from his leaning position holding his knees, having caught his breath and fully remembering his anger. “If anybody’s gonna pay for anything, it’ll be you Malfoy.”

"Did you hear everything we were saying?" Draco asked, suddenly, ignoring Harry's threat.

"Every—fucking—word." Harry's jaw had gone stiff again and his hand tightened around his wand, itching for the fight.

Draco raised his eyebrows at his enemy. "Wonder why she kept it from you?" This question threw Harry off a bit, but he quickly recovered.

"Keep talking. I don't care about Filch; I'll blow a hole right through you!"

"So touchy, Potter!" And the boy actually smiled at him with amusement. "I was only asking. But, I expect you two can work it out, eh?" He shook his head with mock sympathy. "Well maybe not...you're so violent."

Harry reached out and pushed Draco into a desk, nearly toppling the boy over backwards. Draco faltered but regained his balance and pushed Harry right back. They were on the point of starting up their wrestling again when they heard Filch yelling: "Dueling in the halls! Just wait till I bring ya to the Inquisitor! I'll-I'll..." it seemed he had run out of punishments to yell out, but he was closer, nonetheless, and he would discover them if they stayed.

Harry needed to leave—he needed to get to the Room of Requirement before the others started to worry. And he needed to see Angelina right away. Harry stepped up to Draco, so close that his breath disturbed the other boy's eyelashes. "Tomorrow night, Malfoy. Midnight. On the pitch."

"I'll be there." Draco managed a great deal of menace that would have impressed anyone other than Harry.

This confirmed, Harry backed up and reached out to grasp the doorknob. He was on the point of stepping out when a thought came to him and he turned his scathing gaze back to the pale boy that he loathed with every fiber of his being. "And if you touch my girlfriend again I'll break your fucking neck."

Without another word Harry left him, slipping out of the classroom silently and sprinting away down the hall.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Tell Him

Harry had to make sure that Filch was gone before he swiftly searched the hall for his cloak. He kicked his feet around the smooth surface of the floor until he felt something soft and invisible beneath his trainer and scooped it up in his shaking hands. He marched up to the seventh floor under cover of the cloak, his eyes unseeing and his veins pulsing with relentless fury.

As he walked, he felt himself falling.

Falling.

Falling.

He was falling into a deep, dark pit of rage.

There were too many things to start with—too many things pushing their way into his mind for him to focus on just one. Why hadn't he done something about it when Malfoy first said those things? Because of Angelina. Why hadn't he forced her to confess to him what she had just said in the hallway? Because she promised him she was all right. Anger...his anger for her almost matched his anger for Malfoy. He stayed these thoughts as best he could as he approached the corridor with the hideous tapestry. Harry was startled by Dobby when he swept the cloak from around his shoulders.

"Where has you been, Harry Potter, sir?" the little elf squeaked, wringing his hands, his enormous eyes wide with relief. "We was most worried!"

"I got held up, Dobby," Harry said distractedly, walking past the wall and then turning around to walk past it again, only thinking that he had to get in there to Angelina. He turned a second time, walking past the nervous little elf without looking at him.

"But you is all right, Harry Potter, sir?" Dobby asked, watching Harry make the third stride and then stepping aside as the door to the room appeared.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks." Harry patiently acknowledged Dobby's concern and opened the door.

When he stepped inside every pair of eyes turned his way and the commotion in the room ceased immediately. Harry steeled himself against their curious, worried, and shocked expressions. He closed the door behind him and walked through the circle of pairs to the back of the room where he discarded his cloak and map on the cushions laid out there. Pulling out his wand, Harry smoothed his hair and stepped forward, into their midst, addressing the silence.

Fred, George, and Ron stood regarding him with blank expressions that revealed nothing to those around them but meant a great deal to Harry. He knew that they would expect him to tell them every detail once they were alone, but Harry did not feel up to it. At the moment, he could only feel the anger pumping through him hot enough to burn him from the inside out.

He saw Angelina standing in a corner with Katie Bell at her side, looking at him intensely. His eyes narrowed at her for a split second before he turned to Hermione, who had partnered up with Neville, and asked evenly: "What'd I miss?"

Hermione hesitated, glancing over at Angelina too before answering him. "Um...well, we've been practicing our shields like you said to. Everyone's catching on pretty well, I think..." she frowned, somewhat apologetically. "Only Angelina's just arrived a few minutes before you, so...Harry what's wrong? Why are you so late?"

"Filch," came Harry's terse reply. "He almost caught me, I had to lose him."

"Oh..." Hermione looked as if she didn't quite believe him, but he gave her no time to ask more questions.

Harry cleared his throat and sighed, trying to quell the lingering fury inside waiting for the opportunity to erupt again. He was shaking, he was so angry, and it seemed that most people could see this but he ignored their stares and told them clearly: "Okay I need to see how everyone's doing. We'll go around to each person separately, and I

want you to show me how you perform the shield while I send something flying at you." He heard some of them murmur at this, and added: "I'll use something soft. One of those cushions, I guess. It won't hurt."

Harry struggled to get a grip on himself, taking a deep breath to stay his quivering rage, but his mind attacked him with images of Malfoy and Angelina over and over as he watched people do as he asked. Cho smiled at him nervously when he levitated one of the cushions and told her to get ready to protect herself. Using the banishing charm he had learned in Flitwick's class, Harry sent the cushion at her swiftly and she shouted "Protego!" causing a warm, golden bubble of magic to swell around her that stopped the cushion's acceleration and made it drop to the floor at her feet.

Everyone applauded her, and she blushed, adverting her gaze from Harry as he reached down to retrieve the pillow. "Very good Cho."

"Thanks, Harry..." she muttered sincerely, stepping aside so that Marietta could take her turn.

Harry did all of them one by one, but when he came to Angelina he paused, saying faintly that perhaps he should not test her just yet because she hadn't had time to practice with the others. He could not help his gaze from lingering on hers, his words very simple but also very heavy under the influence of the volcano inside him.

"I can do it," was Angelina's response. Everyone grew quiet again, clearly feeling uncomfortable by their unspoken stand off. She looked positively close to tears, but Harry could not let go of his anger.

"Fine. On three, then." He levitated the cushion with his wand and they locked eyes. "One—two—three—Propello!"

The bright blue cushion went zooming at her with a little too much force, but she reacted to it swiftly, her glowing orb of protection knocking it back several inches and to the floor before it hit her. Harry sighed and lowered his wand, stooping to pick up the cushion again as the others congratulated Angelina's quick spell work. She didn't

take her eyes off him but he ignored her, turning now to address the lot of them.

“Okay. We’ve only got a little time left, but I want to try something before we stop.” He looked around and his eyes caught sight of Ginny. He motioned for her to come forward and she did, not at all looking at him the way the others were. She didn’t seem to wish any more heavy curiosity to weigh him down, and he was so glad for that. Harry then held the cushion out to Hermione. “You send this at her, Hermione.”

Hermione nodded and took the cushion, levitating it in front of herself with her wand. “On three?”

“Yeah...” Harry raised his own wand. Ginny stood still, watching them both, her eyes shining. Hermione counted to three and then sent the cushion flying at Ron’s younger sister. Harry shouted “Protego!” and instead of a glowing orb of magic forming around himself, it formed around Ginny and the pillow halted, falling once again to the floor. Everyone reacted to this, murmuring amongst themselves.

“It’s been my experience...” Harry spoke, turning again to face them, his expression severe and his tone very solemn. “...that sometimes to get to you, your enemy will hurt someone close to you. I mean this in both senses of the word.” Everyone hushed as he surveyed them; even Zacharius Smith seemed subdued and captivated. “It isn’t enough to learn how to protect yourself. You have to protect each other, too. Your friends. Your...” Angelina, who was taller than most, came into his view again and he almost faltered at the sight of her but he quickly turned away to Ron. “Your girlfriends and boyfriends. Your parents. Your sisters and brothers.”

Cho let out a tiny little whimper, tears springing forth in her eyes. He knew she was thinking of Cedric and it pained him. Fred stepped forward and patted her gently on the back. Harry silently thanked him with his eyes and continued.

“So I want us to learn how to do it this way too, okay? Ron, come here for a moment.” Ron reluctantly stepped forward, regarding Harry reverently. Harry chose not to acknowledge his friend’s gaze and

motioned for Hermione to take Ginny's place. "Okay, we'll try it with you guys, now. Are you ready, Ron?"

"Uh...yeah." Ron swallowed.

He looked over at Hermione, his blue eyes warm with feeling, and she gazed back. Her chest was fluttering slightly. Harry could see, despite his obstinate anger, that they truly cared for each other, and why they had ignored it for so long was beyond him. The lanky Weasley boy raised his wand. Harry levitated the cushion, counted to three and then, zoom! Ron stuttered his incantation, and the pillow hit Hermione softly on the shoulder and fell.

"Shite! Sorry, Harry." Ron's cheeks turned red and his nostrils flared with disappointment.

Harry stalked over to Hermione and snatched up the pillow, bringing it back to Ron and saying flatly: "Again."

They tried four more times, each time Harry counting to three and banishing the pillow at Hermione, and each time Ron not being able to sufficiently erect a shield around her. The last time had been close, and the gold magic flickered at them for a moment but died out just as the cushion reached it and she was struck in the face. Rubbing her nose, Hermione managed a weak smile at Ron. "It's okay, Ron," she reassured him.

"No, it's not!" Harry snapped, his anger rising to the brim suddenly. He stared at them both, feeling bad for yelling but not being able to stop himself. He felt like punching Malfoy over and over and over again the way Angelina had described to him in her dream and his head ached and his heart ached and Ron was driving him crazy with his muttered apologies and hunched shoulders. "What's the matter with you?" he demanded of his friend, causing Ron to blanch in surprise. "That is Hermione! What if I were a Death Eater? What if we were fighting them off and somebody tried to hit her with a curse?"

"Harry, mate, it's only--" Fred was saying, but Harry shook his head fervently, his eyes not leaving Ron's.

"Don't you care about her enough to want to--t-to need to protect her?"

"Yes..." Ron whispered. Harry would not let up.

"I didn't hear you," he pressed firmly.

Hermione took a step forward. "Harry, leave him alone."

He ignored her. The two boys stood face to face, their eyes locked on each others. Ron had no way of knowing the true source of Harry's frustration, but the words his friend threw at him seemed to be having an effect.

"Think, Ron! Think hard, because this is not just pretend. They're Voldemort's followers! They'll try to hurt her, kill her! What are you going to do? There won't be any bloody counting to three!"

Harry lifted his wand suddenly and shouted "Propello!" Everyone gasped as he banished the cushion toward Hermione, who screeched and leapt backward, forgetting that it couldn't really harm her. Harry's white noise had been upon him again, so he didn't hear Ron bellow the incantation, finally producing a bright golden orb around their friend that not only stopped the cushion but sent it flying off in another direction where it crashed into the wall and landed with a plump sigh on the floor.

The room was so silent that when the white noise faded all Harry could hear was his own breathing. Everyone was still—staring—waiting. Hermione marveled at the protective magic still glowing around her and then lowered her gaze to Ron. Their arguments and petty jealousy were forgotten in that moment. Ron lowered his wand and the glow disappeared elegantly.

"Thanks..." he told Harry quietly.

This caused the raw emotion coursing through him to swell violently and he tilted his head at his friend apologetically. "I'm sorry I yelled at you...but...this is important." He turned once again to the rest of them. "That's why we started this group. Umbridge and Fudge are killing us

all slowly by shutting out the truth, and it's up to us to stop Voldemort's attack when it comes. I hope you all get that. We'll have to fight, kids or not."

No one spoke a word. Harry imagined that if any one of them chose not to show up to the next meetings, he would not be surprised at all. They all seemed to be visibly affected by his use of Voldemort's name not once but twice, and it made him feel even worse. Hermione cleared her throat. "Maybe we should call it quits for tonight, okay Harry?"

He lowered his head and stared at the floor, but nodded.

Everyone gathered their things and got into their usual groups to be escorted by Ron, Hermione, and Dobby back to their respective parts of the castle. Harry stayed behind, still staring at the floor. Ron lingered at the door for a moment but Angelina reached out and touched him on the shoulder, startling him. He hadn't realized she was there still, but he understood that it would be better if she talked to Harry. Ron backed out, gazing at his friend empathetically again before he disappeared through the door.

"Harry."

He looked up at her, his attempt to meditate in order to suppress his violent anger disturbed by her soft voice. She still looked as if she wanted to cry. He understood why she felt this way, but it was hard for him to soften to this. Harry only struggled to call forth the will to speak to her without yelling, as he so wanted to. He could not decide whether he was angrier at her or at what she had done. And what had she done? Something flickered dimly in his mind but he chose not to acknowledge it now.

"Are you all right?" he asked with no small amount of difficulty.

She shuddered, the tears springing forth. "No..."

Harry swallowed. He was doing a good job of keeping it at bay, the anger. All he needed to do was concentrate on getting through this, and he would be fine. "Angelina, tell me the truth. Now. Please."

"The truth about what?" she uttered through a suppressed sob.

"About that fucking coward putting his hands on you!" Harry bellowed, losing his self control quickly. She jumped at his sudden outburst and the tears started coming freely then, but he ignored them. "Angelina. I asked you—I asked you if he hurt you for real, and you said no. You told me--!"

"I couldn't remember!" she insisted. "I still can't!" Angelina took a deep breath and wiped her damp eyes. "That's why I didn't tell you—I had nothing to go on. And now I know why—he Obliviated me."

Harry's chest heaved as though he would vomit, but the only thing that would come gushing out of him was more of his ugly temper even though he was trying so hard to find that part of himself that would embrace her and tell her everything was going to be okay. He felt so betrayed, however, that he simply couldn't muster it.

"I'm going to kill him!"

"Harry, please!"

Angelina rushed forth, taking hold of him and pressing herself against him, her damp cheek against his flushed one. He stiffened, but then relaxed and brought his arms up to embrace her. Harry closed his eyes and held her tight, trying to bat away the images of Malfoy touching her, grabbing her...he couldn't. And he realized suddenly that having every question answered by her or Malfoy wouldn't help at all. He realized that knowing every detail would not make him feel any better, and that screaming at her for withholding information--information that, Merlin's beard, boy, she didn't have herself!--was not a solution.

"I shouldn't have lied to you about the duel. But I thought you'd try to stop me. Now I know I have to do it."

Angelina sniffed and stood up straight, releasing him. "Harry, don't."

He refrained from speaking right away. He thought that she would understand, and having her say exactly what he did not want to hear was making his anger rise rapidly again.

"Don't? Don't what exactly?" Angelina gazed at him beseechingly, trying to figure out how best to explain herself to him. How could she tell him about her dreams? About Umbridge and the Quidditch pitch, and that whip and her evil cheering... "Hit him again! Hit him harder!" All the while waiting for Harry like some beast in a cave waiting to strike at any innocent passer by. How could she tell him that she had such a terrible feeling—such a terrible feeling that something bad would happen to him if he went off blindly trying to defend her honor? "Answer me."

She could see him struggling to control his temper and knew that he was losing.

"He—this—is my problem. Let me handle it. Please..."

"What are you going to do?" Harry let go of her and stepped back, squinting incredulously. "Hex him so his eyes go crossed?"

"No..."

"Oh well excuse me if I don't think whatever you've got planned is good enough."

It was her turn to be angry, and she wiped the newest tears from her face again harshly. "And dueling with him in the middle of the bloody Quidditch pitch is a better idea, is it?"

"YES!" he exploded, "I'm going to turn him into a goddamned beetle and squash his bloody brains out!" Harry clenched his fists at his sides, glaring at her. Oh, he just couldn't understand it. He wanted to shout at her. He wanted to seize her and shake those tears from her face and make her wake up to what she was saying to him, but just then he realized that he didn't want to hurt her, he wanted to hurt Malfoy, and she wouldn't stop him this time.

"And what will you do if you're caught? Will you turn Umbridge into a beetle, too?" Angelina was no longer crying. "Look at you! You're so angry you're not thinking clearly!"

"I am thinking. I won't get caught, Fred and George are helping me, and even if I do I don't care!"

"Yes, you do care, Harry. You care because this school is not just where all of your friends are, or where Dumbledore is, but it's the only real home you've got!"

Harry supposed he ought to feel positively about the fact that she had recognized this in him; his feelings about Hogwarts. He supposed even, that he should understand that it really meant something; her attempting to protect him from potentially ruining the one good thing in his life besides her and his friends. But then, no, no, no—if she could see this about him then hadn't she understood that when he was yelling at Ron about protection and courage and will that it applied to them most of all? Couldn't she see, through all of his yelling, that he was starting to really care about her because she was the first person in his life to make him feel truly loved?

But here she was...she was expressly forbidding him to do what a loved one does when the person he cares about is being threatened. She was trying to prevent him from protecting her—why?

"Yeah, you're right." He told her, now. "Hogwarts is my home, and right now it's being ruled over by that bloody tyrant Umbridge and Malfoy is doing everything he can to get me out, so I'm going to defend myself! And you, too!"

"Oh, please, oh please Harry I understand why you think you have to but Umbridge is more dangerous than you think. She's crazy! She'll—she'll..." Angelina stammered, her eyes roaming all over the room trying to grasp the words to express her concerns for him from the thin air.

"I know what she is. I found out she sent those Dementors after me last summer. She's the reason I was almost expelled, and Malfoy's

father helped her. Now they want to get me out of the school, but I won't let them."

"But you're doing exactly what they want!"

"Angelina, I'm not arguing about this anymore! I'm going. Don't try and--!" Harry suddenly felt a white-hot swell of pain explode in his scar and he buckled over, his hand flying up to his forehead. Coupled with that was the most agonizing, vicious rage he had ever felt, and it had nothing to do with the present situation. He growled at his shoes, saliva dripping from his crimson lips as the blinding pain pulsed through the thin flesh of his poor jagged scar.

"Harry?" Angelina moved towards him, her voice hushed with uneasiness. "Harry, what is it?"

"It can be done!" he rasped, the fury racking his body through and through. "It will be done! Do you hear me? Do you? I will have that boy's head!" He knew that this was not his own mind making him say these things, but he could not stop it. He stood up and glared at her, the pain in his scar so horrible that he grimaced awfully at her.

"What?" Angelina reared back in total disbelief. His fists were clenched at his sides, his eyes narrow and seething with rage. He did not look like himself, and Angelina felt so afraid both for him and of him that she didn't know what to do.

"Angelina..." he uttered, using his own voice. "You should get out of here. Now..." He felt the ferocity surging forth again, just as he thought it was dissipating and he trembled against it. He didn't want to hurt her, but felt he would if she stood staring at him like that any longer. Voldemort was enraged, and he was hurting someone, Harry could feel it. His scar felt as if it would start bleeding soon if the pain didn't let up.

"You're not well, Harry. Please tell me what's wrong."

"Get out."

"No!"

"Leave," he growled through clenched teeth. "Angelina, please get out, go away, I'm warning you--!" Harry was struggling to keep standing, but he was hurting and it was all he could do not to snap his wand in half. It was like Voldemort had his hand around Harry's head, and he remembered how awful it had been for him when the evil wizard had touched him in that cemetery.

"Do you want to push me away, now? Over something that isn't yours to deal with in the first place? You think it's easy for me to have no memory of what happened to me? What do you want from me, Harry?"

"I WANT YOU TO GET OUT!"

She stood there for more awful seconds, staring at him. "If you do this..." Through his agony he blanched at these words. She did not finish the sentence, but he didn't need her to. 'If you do this', what? What? 'If you do this it's over between us'...was that what she was saying? Rage bubbled forth again, and he wanted to throw her words back at her. "Fine!" she snatched up her bag and robe and backed away from him. "You go and murder Malfoy and get sent off to Azkaban!"

"I will then!" Harry bellowed, despite himself, and he abruptly turned and threw his fist into a row of books on the shelf behind him, knocking most of them loudly to the floor. "ARGHHH!" Harry kicked a book across the room and collapsed on the pile of cushions, holding his throbbing head in both hands. Angelina stood still and watched him for a moment before turning around and leaving him alone, finally.

Harry held his head down, his fingers laced into his hair, praying silently for it to stop. Get out of my head, get out. The pain pulsed and ripped and the anger boiled for a long time until Harry felt he would pass out. Just as he was sure he would retch, it began to recede.

Dobby slipped his tiny body in, his enormous eyes glowing in the moonlight coming through the window above Harry. "Harry Potter, sir...is you all right? You looks most pale, sir."

"I'm fine...Dobby..." Harry panted, still clutching his poor head.

"Will you be needing the room any longer, sir?" Dobby squeaked, looking from Harry to the books strewn all over the floor nervously.

"No...I'm going to bed."

He stood up shakily; almost swaying off his balance, but Dobby rushed forth and caught Harry's hand before he fell backwards. Smiling meekly, Dobby used his cool, bony fingers to move Harry's hand over to his round little head. "Dobby will help Harry Potter back to his bed, sir."

Gently using Dobby as a crutch, and taking care to put on his Invisibility Cloak, Harry allowed himself to be led out of the Room of Requirement and carefully back up to Gryffindor Tower. Dobby had an excellent knowledge of the ins and outs of the castle by now, as he'd been living there for going on three years, and he guided Harry back with no trouble at all. They avoided Filch effortlessly; Harry knew he was still on the prowl for him and Malfoy after they'd destroyed the banister on Umbridge's floor. He was feeling totally drained from so much emotional and physical turmoil in such a short amount of time that he simply allowed Dobby to do most of the thinking for them as they made their way.

Dobby bypassed the portrait hole, to Harry's quiet confusion, and went instead to a secret passageway that the elves used when they came in to clean the common rooms. Harry watched Dobby snap his fingers, causing a stone bust of the third ever Gryffindor Head of House to slide out of his way, revealing a narrow passageway. Dobby led Harry into it, where it seemed to stretch on forever in the dim depths, but they turned and Harry found himself walking towards a warm orange light that he knew was the fire in the common room.

He could just make out the couches and comfortable crimson chairs that surrounded the hearth as they advanced.

Dobby waved his little hand and the fire died out just as they made it to what Harry had always seen as the stone back to the fireplace. They stepped over the logs and into the common room. Harry turned

around quickly and did not see the passageway they'd come through, but the stone back that had always been there whenever he sat in front of the fire.

"That's a neat trick, Dobby," he mused tiredly.

"We uses it to clean without disturbing, sir." Dobby smiled up at him. "All the elves has this magic in the castle. We knows all the secrets. And there are many."

"Well, I'm glad you're on my side, then..." muttered Harry, sliding into an armchair and closing his tired eyes.

"Will Harry Potter be needing anything else? Hot something to drink? Fire again?" Harry heard Dobby snap his fingers and a second later the warm light of the fire was flickering across his eyelids. He shook his head.

"No, thank you. I'll just sit here for a moment."

"Well...good night, Harry Potter, sir."

"Good night, Dobby."

Harry watched Dobby leave the way he had come, and sat in the gloom of the empty and silent common room for a long time. His scar pricked awfully, and his eyes felt drawn together and tight with the slowly fading tension from all of his yelling. Harry thought of Angelina.

He thought of her face as she backed Draco Malfoy into a corner, threatening him that she would get him back for what he had done. Well what had he done? It was severe enough to use a Memory Charm on her, wasn't it? The thought of it made Harry dig his fingers into the fabric of the chair he was sitting in.

Yes, Harry had a temper. And they always told him it would lead him to trouble.

Trouble. Voldemort had infiltrated his mind again. Perhaps not willingly—Harry doubted he would see such glimpses of what the

dark wizard was up to with Voldemort's permission. There was something he wanted, desperately. Harry remembered the members of the Order talking of a weapon. He remembered his dreams; he had them several times a week now, with no progress whatsoever. He thought of that mysterious door.

Voldemort wanted Harry's head...He had Harry's head...Dumbledore would be getting a visit from him as soon as this Malfoy thing was taken care of...Harry was going to blast that fucker's fingers off one by one...that'd teach him to touch without asking permission first...

Harry was unaware that he had fallen asleep.

"Stand up straight. Breathe normally. Do not allow anxiety or fear into your conscious mind; for this will surely cripple your ability to react to your enemy's attack properly or preempt his next move. Your wand is an extension of yourself. Hold it straight forward, using your other arm to erect a proper dueling stance. These stances, shown in the diagrams below, enable the wizard to concentrate his magic into a central, focused point. Practice this—you will find that your magic doubles (sometimes triples, depending on the wizard) in force by using these stances to your advantage."

Harry paused in his reading, wondering how he could use a stance to his advantage, and where his focal point was. According to the diagram drawn below the passage in the tattered copy of *Dueling Through the Ages* he was examining, different wizards had different points on their person through which they could focus extremely potent magic for the using.

Harry assumed, however, that the book was referring to adult wizards only, but he did not expressly give weight to this. If he had learned anything over the past four and a half years, it was that age is nothing but a number. He read on.

"In order to properly assess where your magic is best concentrated, you may use a technique that is simple in nature but very meaningful upon completion. It is called Meditating Your Magical Center. For your first attempt at this, stand in an open space or large room; preferably empty. This space should be free of distraction and have a

healthy source of light. The quiet, stillness, and light are important; for they are used both to propel your mind into the depths of semi-consciousness (quiet and stillness), and also to draw you back once you have achieved your goal (light).

"Concentrate on the quiet, and be still. Breathe. Breathing is important. It relaxes your senses and through its rhythm it allows you to open your mind slowly. Feel your magic pulsing through you. It will be difficult at first, but remember to stay very still and breathe well. The quiet will close in on you, and you will feel yourself falling into your own--"

Harry felt a hand on his and looked up to find Hermione and Ron standing over him. "So this is where you've been this whole time?" Ron asked, frowning a little. Harry nodded silently, waiting patiently for Hermione to release his hand and relinquish her concerned gaze from him.

He had risen just after dawn and paced around the common room for a couple of hours, thinking. He thought of everything under the sun—from Umbridge to Sirius to Angelina to Dumbledore...Draco, Snape and Lucius Malfoy...just about everything crossed his mind at some point during that time. He decided that things would need to be dealt with one problem at a time; the first being the duel he was to participate in that night. So Harry had gone up to his room, grabbed his towel and retreated to the showers.

He did not have another attack from Voldemort's mood swings, but he made lists of things he wanted to do to Malfoy as the water ran over his hair and into his eyes. He came to the conclusion that he was indeed taking this seriously. Turning Malfoy into a jackass or making him giggle uncontrollably just did not seem to be enough.

He made peace with the fact that if caught he would be chucked out, but was determined to look on the bright side: if he was expelled—if he really was, Merlin forbid—he could go and live with his godfather. There was no other person he could think of that he missed more right now. Sirius would be delirious with happiness, he knew, and he supposed that living at Grimmauld Place wouldn't be so bad if it were

the two of them. His godfather was still a kid at heart, despite the years spent locked up in Azkaban.

After his shower Harry had been among the very first kids in the Great Hall for breakfast, but he ate and left before half of them noticed he was there. He had been in the library for the last couple of hours, reading books on dueling. Today was match day for Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, but Harry had given it little thought, such was his focus on learning how to obliterate Malfoy.

Seeing Ron in his Quidditch gear now gave him a small pang of covetous sorrow, but he ignored it and watched as his two friends sat down at the table with him.

“We were worried about you. Ron said you didn’t come back to your room last night,” Hermione began immediately, her eyes sweeping over the four or five open books spread out in front of him. “And...” she sighed and leaned in, her expression grave. “...Angelina was close to tears when she appeared after the meeting. She said you’d screamed at her and that you were planning to duel with Malfoy?”

“That’s right.” Harry avoided her gaze, instead focusing on the diagram he’d been studying earlier.

“So it’s true?” Hermione hissed. “Did the twins put you up to this?”

“No.”

“Harry! You can’t! You realize that if you’re caught, you’ll be exp--!”

Harry did look at her now, and she hushed. There was a pause in which none of them spoke, and then through the heavy silence Ron leaned forward. “Harry...you’re not gonna...like, try and...eh...”

“Kill him?” Harry answered flatly.

Ron nodded. “Yeah. I mean, well, I’m sure he deserves it but, mate...come on. Angelina said you were acting like a madman last night. Screaming your head off and knocking shelves over and such. What did Malfoy do?”

Harry took a deep breath and decided to simply tell them. "I think he tried to rape Angelina and erased her memory afterward."

"WHAT?" Hermione clamped her hand over her mouth, startled by her own raised voice, and after glancing quickly about to make sure Pince wasn't around she and Ron leaned in even closer. Harry suddenly felt very claustrophobic, but only shifted in his seat, really whishing that he could get back to his reading.

"Okay." Ron gritted, his cheeks turning red and his nostrils flaring with anger. "Never mind. I take it back. Kill him."

"Ron, no!" Hermione reproached him sharply from behind her trembling hand.

"Well you heard what Harry just said!" Ron hissed back. "That sod deserves nothing less than to have his knees broken! If he ever so much as touched you, I'd wring his slimy neck!"

Hermione lowered her hand from her mouth and reached over to touch him on the cheek. It looked like it took her a tremendous amount of effort, but that it was something she had perhaps been longing to do for a long time and he had just given her a real reason to act on the desire. He was mid-rant and his mouth hung open as she did this. Harry watched, feeling very gloomy and removed but deciding to let them have their tender moment.

"That is very sweet, Ron, but I would never ask you to put yourself in that position."

"What position, exactly?" Harry cut in. Hermione turned to him and muttered that he knew very well what position. "Angelina is on the same crazy way of thinking! What is it about you girls? Can't you understand that it doesn't matter what risk I'm taking? Why can't you just understand that?"

Harry lowered his head to his book and clamped his mouth shut to keep from yelling anymore. It seemed that lately he had been unable to control his ever-strengthening temper. His scar had pricked

uncomfortably all day and was now throbbing and stinging a little. He thought absently that perhaps Voldemort had imprinted him with some of that ferocity of his when invading his mind so much with his feelings. And he thought still more secretly that perhaps it would help him come dueling time, though he wouldn't dare verbalize this now.

Hermione persisted, "And what about Angelina? How do you think she feels in all this? Harry, she was the one who was attacked and had her memory erased—I should have realized something was wrong when she asked me about Memory Charms, shoot Hermione!"

Harry was a bit thrown off by her abrupt spell of chiding herself under her breath, and exchanged looks with Ron, but then shook his head passionately. "I asked her about it and she deliberately kept her feelings from me from the off. She knew something was wrong with her all along, but she wouldn't bloody tell me! How am I supposed to feel about that, huh?"

Hermione clicked her tongue at him impatiently. "You're supposed to be patient and understanding like a good, supportive boyfriend instead of going off beating up everything in sight and bashing your chest like some awful gorilla, Harry!"

Harry scowled and both he and Hermione looked to Ron sharply for a word of support. He switched his gaze from his best mate to his potential girlfriend and gave a confused sigh. "Well you both have a point!"

Clenching his jaw and fixing Ron with a gaze of betrayal, Harry said dryly: "It doesn't matter, anyway. I think we've broken up."

"Harry, you didn't!" Hermione looked completely scandalized.

"What? It wasn't me." He didn't really believe that, and in fact he really desperately wanted to ask Hermione to go and find Angelina and convince her to forgive him for yelling at her and frightening her but his stubborn resolve would have none of it. "She basically said that if I went ahead with this she wouldn't see me anymore."

"I can't blame her. The way you were acting at the D.A. meeting...and what she told us afterwards..." Hermione looked at him with a mixture of worry and disapproval.

"Hey, he helped me work out my protection shield," Ron said in Harry's defense. "It was all right."

Hermione did not look convinced, so Harry explained that he had still been angry over seeing Draco and Angelina's exchange in the hall outside Umbridge's office. "And after the meeting when we were having our row, my scar starting hurting again. It was really bad—Voldemort—shush Ron, it's only a name—was really furious and I couldn't control myself. I didn't mean to scare her."

"Oh my goodness...well, Harry that is all the more reason for you to call off this whole dueling nonsense and go straight to Dumbledore about your scar!"

"I am going to Dumbledore, but not until I'm finished with Malfoy. It's not as if he's been much help up 'til now, anyway."

"This is so stupid!"

"No—it's—not. You don't understand."

"And I don't think I want to! Oh please, Harry don't do this! Malfoy can be dealt with in other ways!"

"Oh really?" Harry turned the page of his book hard, trying with all his might not to slam his fist on the table like he wanted to. "What do you suggest? Shall I go to Professor McGonagall? 'Oh, excuse me Professor, but I was wondering: you know that blond kid who looks like a rat in robes; Draco Malfoy? Well, I just found out that he tried to rape my girlfriend and then used a Memory Charm on her. I don't have any proof or anything, but all the same, do you think you could just nip by Potions this afternoon with a couple of Dementors and drag him off to the juvenile wing at Azkaban for me? Thanks.' "

Hermione sat quiet, and Harry did not look at either her or Ron. He continued reading, counting the seconds until they went off to the match.

--into your own magical space, that rests deep within you. You will know it because all feeling, sense, and desire will drop. Stillness becomes true and quiet need not be sought. Now take aim. Your wand is yourself, extended outward and ready to do your bidding. But, also it is your guide. Let it guide you; the tip acting as a radar for magical energy within you. You will, after a moment (it should only take a moment, but for some wizards the process will be slower), feel the pull of your magic. It will pull your wand hand to it, drawing it towards its force, and then you should perform a spell (preferably an incantation that would normally take force and concentration in the first place, like a particular battle charm) and feel the amplified magic course through you! That is your center! That is the core of all your magic. You should operate from this point at all times during the duel, and once you lock on to its location, your natural sense of magic within yourself will allow you to use it with more ease than before. The more you focus, the easier it will become to expand your core; making it bigger and therefore stronger..."

Harry marked this page and closed *Dueling Through the Ages*, reaching over to retrieve *Battle Charms*. He had almost forgotten that Ron and Hermione were still there.

"So you're not coming to the match, then?" Ron asked quietly.

Harry looked up, in the middle of opening *Battle Charms* to the first chapter, 'Basic Charms and Spells for the First-time Duelist.' "I need to prepare. You understand, right?"

"Sure. Of course I do, mate." Ron shrugged. "I'm not expecting any huge victory anyway. We may scrape by but Angelina was being nice about my goal-keeping. I don't think I've improved much."

"Oh shut up, you've been practicing like a madman almost every weekend."

"Yeah, well...I dunno."

"You'll do brilliantly, Ron," Hermione assured him, giving his hand a squeeze. Ron reacted rather ambiguously. Harry couldn't tell if his cheeks were red over the affectionate gesture Hermione had given him or that she had praised his goal-keeping skills. He wanted to ask what was up with the two of them—they didn't seem particularly comfortable around each other as they should've been (at least in his mind) if they had finally admitted that they liked each other. But then they were finally on speaking terms again, and that was definitely a step in the right direction.

"You guys have been working really hard. Angelina is a great captain. You'll win." Harry smiled encouragingly at his friend and watched as he stood with Hermione to leave.

"You guys are really broken up?" Ron asked almost skeptically.

Harry paused. "I think so."

"That's tough. But you know she'll come around."

"Maybe...maybe not. But look, don't worry about me. You go have a good match."

"Thanks, Harry. Listen—you know I'm coming with you tonight, right? Fred and George, as well."

"I don't know if that's such a--"

"Rubbish. I'm coming and that's the end, savvy?"

"Oh dear..." Hermione moaned. "Do you at least have a plan? Do you at least know what you'll do if Umbridge or somebody comes along?"

"Fred and George are quite brilliant in that way. I'm sure they've taken care of it, Hermione." Harry still could not let go of his stubborn resolve and she squared her shoulders at him.

"I'd like to tell you that you're absolutely bonkers--" Harry narrowed his eyes in warning. "But I'll simply say that I'll be rooting for you. If

you must do this totally insane and rubbish thing, then be careful Harry. Protect yourself. Malfoy may be a little snot who deserves what he gets, but he'll likely try his best to hurt you badly. Just for the fun of it, you know?"

He softened at her concern, but did not loosen his determined gaze.
"I know. He won't get the chance."

She gave him a watery smile and added: "We should use these books on dueling at the next meeting. What you said last night about having to fight, kids or not...it was the scariest yet truest thing I've heard come out of your mouth."

Perhaps thirty minutes later, as Harry read over a list of beginner's battle charms, his mouth sounding out incantations like "Incursus Artus," "Fracta Artus," "Affligo," and a host of others, he fancied he heard, even so far into the castle, a resounding cheer that he hoped was for Gryffindor.

Gryffindor won the match.

Ron looked very happy but also very on edge when they returned to the common room almost an hour later. Harry had finished his reading, and was preparing to sneak off to the Room of Requirement to find his magical center and practice some of the Battle Charms he'd written down. He was just stepping out as they were stepping in, and he had no choice but to relent to Fred, George, Hermione, Ginny, and Ron as they overtook him at the portrait hole; all of them talking to him at once.

"Well, I didn't have much to do, really," Ron said last when Harry asked him how he did. "Angelina and the others pretty much made sure Hufflepuff didn't get near me. And Ginny caught the Snitch, even though we really didn't need her to—we were winning already."

"Great. That's just great guys." Harry mustered as much of a happy smile as he could and prepared to leave them again.

Fred dropped a hand on his shoulder, however. "Tonight's the night, mate."

Harry automatically looked at Ginny to see if she heard, and she had. She didn't look confused or curious, however, and he quickly realized that they had told her. He fully expected her to start scolding him any moment, but instead she merely watched him, her brows furrowed faintly.

"I know. I'm going to go practice."

"You want to take our book?" George asked. Harry thought about it, but shook his head reluctantly. "Thought not..." the twin said seriously. "Ron told us what you found out."

Fred clenched his jaw menacingly and shook his head. "We know it's your fight, but we'll be ready."

Harry didn't think he liked all of them knowing...what they knew. He shifted on his feet uncomfortably, looking from one to the other. They were all looking back at him...he felt strangely claustrophobic. "Where's Angelina?" he asked abruptly.

"Still down at the pitch in the changing rooms," Hermione informed him grimly. "She played so hard—it was kind of scary, actually, but she hasn't really talked much today."

"She didn't even crack a smile when we won," Ginny added. "She's really upset, Harry."

"I know..." he wanted to see her, but didn't know what would happen if he did now. He still had so much anger... "Listen, I'll see you guys at dinner, all right?"

Everyone gave him general answers of 'yeah' and he left them in the common room. He didn't know what he felt—having them all just quietly let him go off to practice methods of hurting a fellow student. He only knew that he didn't truly have Hermione or Ginny's support because they probably felt the same in thinking that he was making a mistake that could cost him his place at school. He knew that Ron, Fred, and George would stand by him, especially the twins, being that

this whole thing had been their idea, but what he really truly wanted was...

“Angelina...” he muttered to himself as he walked past the wall three times.

Harry stood in the now completely empty Room of Requirement, facing a huge window that showered him in light from the frigid sky. His eyes were closed. He remembered details of the passage he read in the book, telling him to be still and breathe. He did this, his chest rising and falling ever-so-slightly. He cleared his mind. Still. Be still. Breathe.

After a long while, Harry felt himself slipping into cool darkness. He raised his wand hand, the wand pointed at his faint reflection in the window pane. He forced himself to let go of all thought. He tried to picture what it was like, the core of magical power resting within him. Was it strong? Was it light—brilliant light burning like a star in a galaxy of darkness...did it pulse with energy and grow brighter when he performed spells? How did the damned thing work? His anxiety was still there, and it poked at him for a few drawn out moments, but then he felt that too ebbing away.

Then, after a moment of nothing but blankness, he felt a ripple of power flutter through him. He almost opened his eyes in surprise, but maintained his stillness, and again came the flutter. His wand began to tremble slightly, and then it moved. This was not even a millimeter, but he felt the move; it was a tingling in the tips of his fingers and in the palm of his hand.

The rippling magic grew, and he noticed then that its origin was somewhere in his chest.

Harry felt the wand move again, and sure enough it was inching towards that point in his chest where the magic was beginning to swell and grow warm. The tiniest pressure began there, and then it grew to a pulse, and then thump, thump, thump, he heard it. It was warm and vibrating and the thumping magic ran all through his body from that point in his chest. Down to the tips of his toes and fingers, making his hair stand on end.

Harry felt something tug at him and he turned, eyes still closed, away from the window to the opposite wall. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. The magic was coursing all through him, but that point was the strongest by far and it gave Harry the strangest, most enabled and powerful sensation he'd ever felt. Harry realized something just as he got into duel stance. It was his heart! The thump-thumping was his heart, and as he opened his mouth and shouted "Terra Motus!" he felt the floor beneath him shake and then boom! He fell to the ground with the force of the spell, dust from the ceiling shivering down on him. Harry opened his eyes and saw that he had cracked the wall in front of him. The quake spell he read about in one of the books in the library seemed to have worked.

Realizing that perhaps the whole school had felt this as he had, Harry jumped to his feet and thought to himself I need "Dueling Through the Ages" again. Harry caught sight of it, having appeared for his convenience along with the other books he'd been reading sitting on the windowsill, and opened it up to the page he'd marked earlier. Quickly he skimmed down until he found what he was looking for.

"The heart is a center of magic that is perhaps the most powerful of the others. It suggests not only courage but also compassion, extreme loyalty, and above all honor. Its strength is in its rhythm—and just as the heart pumps blood through the body, the center there pumps magic. A wizard should count himself lucky if his center is found here..."

The book went on but Harry only read a little farther before he reached in his back pocket for his notes on the spells he wanted to work on, knowing full well that beyond this room Filch, Umbridge and the other people in the school were trying to figure out what had shaken the seventh floor. He was confident that he wouldn't be found, however. He had enlisted Dobby's help again to warn him should anybody stumble upon the room, and he had his Invisibility Cloak with him.

Harry practiced for several hours; performing and re-performing spells and charms that he had never even heard of before. There was little more he could do but make sure he was saying the incantations

right, for he was alone and by the time he was done the walls around him had many cracks and dents and chunks missing from the force of the spells he used on them.

He practiced his dueling stances, using the diagrams in the book as his guide.

The diagrams instructed: "First stance; rise up and at the ready..." Harry stood up stone straight, his wand arm pointed out in front of him and his other arm raised above his head, the fingers on his hand forming an upside down V. "Second stance; mark for attack..." Harry lowered his free hand swiftly and brought in his elbow a little, the upside down V parallel to the elbow on his wand hand. He did these over and over again, and by the time he got to: "Third stance; down, aim, and execute..." and fell quickly to the floor on his side, his wand aimed acutely, his head raised slightly so he could see his target (the book on the windowsill), he was sweating.

Harry practiced his moves and spells until the light in the window grew dim and he was mopped with sweat, his nerves quivering with adrenaline. He felt really good. He almost forgot his anger. It just felt so empowering to be teaching himself something strategic like dueling, and he fancied that whenever he was in a real fight with a Death Eater, he could give them a good run for their money.

When Harry got to dinner his eyes automatically sought out and landed on Draco.

The Slytherin boy was sitting amongst his friends, as usual, but he had a somewhat pained expression on his pale face. Harry thought of Umbridge's punishment and lowered his gaze to the boy's hand. Sure enough, the skin there was cut and red. He could just make out fresh blood tracks along the scrawled letters. He couldn't make out what they spelled, but the satisfaction that rippled through him just then was immense.

Angelina sat with Katie, Alicia, and Lavender. She didn't look up at him when he passed, and he thought that was fine by him. Though, he could not ignore the sinking feeling in his chest as he sat down

between Ginny and Fred. Hermione leaned it quickly, before Harry had even touched his goblet. "Filch is going crazy! Was that you?"

Harry shrugged, though he knew she was talking about the quake spell he'd used in the Room of Requirement. "What's he doing?" he asked, pouring himself some pumpkin juice and wiping his brow.

"He's been limping around here like mad, waving his boney arms about and screaming at everybody," Ron told him through a full mouth. "Umbridge's got a broomstick up her arse as well. I think they thought it was Peeves messing about with Snape's potions again, but that felt more like a giant sneezing to me."

Again, Harry shrugged. "I was practicing."

"You're all sweaty, Harry," Hermione made a face at him. "What were you doing up there anyway?"

"Spells and stuff. I learned some new tricks I wanna teach in our meetings." He paused; his fork poised near his mouth, and peered over at her. "I'll bet your magical center is probably your head..."

"What?" Hermione involuntarily reached up to stroke her forehead and when Ron snickered she fixed him with a look that shut him up quickly. "What's my magical center?" She didn't seem very pleased that he had read about something she hadn't.

Harry didn't answer her, however. He found himself watching Angelina. His fork was still waiting to deliver his food to his mouth.

"She won't talk to any of us," Fred whispered bitterly. "But I'm gonna make her talk, you just wait."

"Don't bother," Harry said automatically.

"You don't mean that, Harry." He turned to see Ginny looking at him sternly and his stony resolve faltered.

"No...I don't."

“You should apologize to her.”

“I know.”

“As soon as possible.”

“Okay.”

“Like, now?”

“Fine!”

Harry stood up from the table again, drawing looks from everyone, and walked off down to where Angelina was attempting to sound genuine when she laughed at some joke Lavender had made about Eloise Midgen. The beautiful Gryffindor looked up at him as he approached. As he had done when he first asked her about Malfoy’s claims, Harry told her needed to talk to her now.

“Outside, please?”

“Okay...” Angelina sighed and stood up, walking with him out of the Great Hall. They found that little corridor again, and stood quietly regarding each other for a very long time, the voices of the eating students they’d left behind echoing out to them cheerily. “You’re still going to do this?” she asked him, her voice very soft.

He swallowed, unable to keep his eyes away from hers, and nodded.
“Tonight.”

Angelina bristled for a second as if she wanted to yell at him, but instead she crossed her arms and looked down. “I wish you wouldn’t...” was all she said.

“Angelina...”

“What if you really hurt him? Or he really hurts you? I don’t think I can...” Angelina’s words trailed off and she bit her lip. She looked tired and worried. He realized that he had not given her an easy time of it. He understood then that she was going through quite an

ordeal—both with knowing that she was attacked and not being able to recall how or when or why, and also not being able to do anything about it. He could imagine what it must've felt like to have to look at Malfoy's face every day knowing what she knew about him. It only reinforced his resolve to do what he was doing.

"I'm sorry I scared you last night," he said, instinctually reaching up and dancing his fingers off her hair. "I didn't want to be so angry in front of you."

"You scared me. I've never seen that look in your eyes before, Harry—it wasn't like you at all." She looked up at him and was probably about to plead with him again but Harry felt a great, sweeping surge of longing rush through him and he pulled her to him, kissing her deeply and not a bit like the shy boy he'd been mere months ago.

Angelina gave a weak sigh and pressed herself into him. He backed her against the opposite wall and deepened the kiss still more, not really caring if they were seen. His roaming hands found the hem of her skirt; fingers hesitantly tracing the edges of her buttocks just beneath the fabric, kneading the skin on her thighs with the tips of his thumbs. "Just come up, hmmmm, to your, uhhh, room with me and we can...ohhh...stay there all night if you want...Harry..." she whispered against his lips as he kissed her and allowed his hands to squeeze her in his favorite places. He was very tempted, and for a minute he didn't even think about what she was really asking, but pictured them in his bed again and maybe not stopping himself this time from letting her touch him down there...

He felt himself reacting to her and she reached around and clasped his back, clinging to him tightly. Harry let the tension seep out of him and the faint chattering coming from the Great Hall buzzed in his ear as the arousal within him buzzed in his groin.

"Please don't go, please just stay with me okay?" Angelina was moving against him—her movements were confusing at first but then he felt the sensation they caused and he made a noise, feeling an erection slowly developing. She undulated warm and writhing against him and pulled him to her—into her flesh only covered by her school

things. He imagined her perfect, round, milk chocolate breasts in the moonlight under his covers that night, and he wanted to see them again now.

He was going to say yes. Yes. I'll come up to my room with you and we'll stay there for as long as you like, just keep doing that...but her gaze shifted from his and landed heavily on something just behind him.

Harry turned around and saw Malfoy standing there, looking something of a lankly white phantom.

He instinctively went for his wand but Angelina's hand stayed his and he realized that they were in the entrance hall and nearly every teacher at the school was just inside the Great Hall.

"Isn't that...sweet?" Malfoy said as if he were going to throw up. Harry said nothing. "Are you ready for tonight, Potter?"

Harry narrowed his eyes and let go of Angelina, stepping out of the corridor and marching right up to the other boy. "Go back and mind your own business, Malfoy."

"You didn't answer my question."

Harry could feel Angelina staring at them as he nodded silently. Malfoy stared at him for a long pause, his eyes flickering at Harry's. He supposed the boy was trying to determine if Harry were really, seriously going to fight him in a duel, but he only stared back coldly. Malfoy backed up and with the tiniest glance at Angelina he re-entered the Great Hall, holding his injured hand close to himself gingerly. Harry turned back to Angelina. She looked very disappointed.

"I'm sorry. I can't forget about it now. Malfoy's getting what's coming to him." She nodded grimly. Harry got the chills all of a sudden, and asked: "What you said after the meeting last night—'If you do this...?'"

Angelina's eyes swam, but she only said in a small voice: "I need time to work some things out. Just go, Harry. You've made your decision. I can't stop you." She hugged herself and turned to lean against the wall again, saying nothing more.

"No--you can't." He felt really rejected and totally sad right then, but merely ran a hand through his dark hair and walked away from her into the Great Hall.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Midnight—AND FIGHT!

She was silent and not real.

She did not speak and he could not feel her because she really wasn't there.

He imagined that if she were actually there, she would be struggling, as she had been twice before. He had to accept that it was not meant to be. This didn't bother him as much as it might have. He had any number of girls; true, all of them with shallow thoughts and aims at popularity or favor; who would be glad to have him look at them twice. Pansy was...Pansy.

He kept asking himself a very simple question, why?

Why did he like her, and why could he not simply just say so, rather than trying to force her to soften to him? Why could he not allow himself to admit something So. Bloody. Simple? But, then, yes that's right, he remembered now. He had admitted it. Quietly, and with more sincerity than he was able to believe. He had told her the simple truth. And she in turn told him that she hoped her brat boyfriend blasted him to dust.

Well, then that did it. She didn't, and probably never would, like him back. And after what he'd pulled, who could blame her? Did he care that she was starting to remember stuff? Yes...but there was nothing he could do about it. Speaking to his father had given him the nerve-chilling suspicion that perhaps his time as a boy with unrealistic crushes on other boys' girlfriends was coming to an end.

If Potter wanted a fight, he would oblige.

Draco lay in his bed, listening to Crabbe and Goyle's loud, infuriating snores, feeling warm in particular places. He wanted to move his hands, but he knew that to do that would be admitting that he wanted to do...that. He didn't want to do that with these idiots around. So he lay still, thinking of her silent and not real but beautiful. Her chest heaving against him as he pinned her down and the power--the power he felt having her helpless beneath him. He concentrated on

the memories of those feelings. Her body. And the power. He closed his eyes and amended the scene—instead of having to hit her with the Memory Charm, instead of her kneeing him so hard and running away...perhaps she did soften. Perhaps she did allow him to kiss her? And what would that kiss feel like? The warmth in those particular places spread and grew more intense as he imagined those full lips against his. What if her body pressed and heaved and struggled against him, but to a sensual rhythm rather than a defiant one? What if instead of calling him nasty names, she called him by his name?

His cheek was in the pillow. His breathing was shallow; pinned up. He wanted to move his hands.

What if she were here, now? What would she do? Call him nasty names, probably. Well he could make her do whatever he wanted since she wasn't real; since she was silent. He could make her look at him the way she looked at Potter. Her eyes...stirred him. He could make her brace herself against him—her hands on his chest, pushing with all her might. And he would reach up and take hold of her wrists and pull her closer to him. He could make her part those full, tender lips and he could make her grip his shirt, and tell him with those stirring eyes of hers that she secretly liked him, too. He could make her move how he wanted her to...all in the quiet...in the dark.

He moved his hand. It slid down of its own will, and the warmth in a particular place awaited it.

He liked it when she hit him. He liked it when she clawed at his hair and thrashed about and screeched with anger. Why? Pansy was so dull. She had called him icy and stiff. Well he was warm, now. Crabbe and Goyle snored but he did not hear it any longer. She was silent and not real, but for the moment she was his and when his hand stopped moving he bit down into his pillow and opened his eyes to see that in ten minutes he would have to be down on the pitch to face her little boyfriend.

He hated Potter with a passion. It had always been like that, ever since he chose a ratty Weasel over him their first night at Hogwarts. Reasons...reasons were many and broad but for this moment—he

hated that other boy because he had what Draco could never touch. There, underneath this well-oiled machine of hatred for Potter, lay a pervasive layer of fear. This fear fueled the hatred and sometimes Draco wished that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had succeeded in killing him the previous year. Sometimes Draco really, truly wanted him dead.

He stood up from his bed and looked down at his aching hand. Umbridge had forced him to write lines with an enchanted quill, just as she had done Potter. His lines were 'I will learn my place.' Draco took his other hand and pressed hard on the wounds, causing the dull ache to intensify and fresh blood to sprout from the thin scabs. He grimaced at the pain but when it was fading he felt better.

He was afraid. But his father was right. It was time for him to act like a Malfoy.

"Crabbe! Goyle!" he shouted, and the two boys woke up, Goyle rolling over and falling heavily off of his bed. They blinked at him with sleepy eyes as he reached down and retrieved his wand holster from his bedside table. "It's almost time. Get ready, I'm not going to be late because of you two lards."

They obeyed him, although a bit sluggishly.

Harry sat awake in his bed, watching the clock and feeling the cold.

Ron had been awake just a little while earlier, but had finally succumbed to sleep. Harry didn't think he would rouse him again before he left. He thought maybe it was best to keep his best friend away, just incase. If he got caught he didn't want to bring Ron down with him. He knew that Fred and George would probably agree with and thank him for this.

There had been a small window of time where Harry was hit with a real feeling of disbelief. He just couldn't wrap his head around this whole thing, and he had turned to Ron and asked with an amused chuckle: "Ron, what the bloody hell am I doing?"

Ron had given him a sleepy shrug. "You're dueling on the pitch at midnight."

Yes, he was dueling on the pitch at midnight.

Harry tried to pump himself up, like if he were getting ready for a big match. He imagined the fake Moody in his face that day in his office after Harry had found out about the dragons. He imagined being confronted by that gnarled, crooked smile and hearing the raspy voice yell at him: "Focus, Potter! Concentrate on your strengths! You get yourself ready, ya hear? Come midnight, boy...be ready to fight!"

Hedwig hooted and turned her luminous eyes to him from her perch on his headboard. Harry looked over at Seamus' clock and saw that it was twelve minutes to midnight. "Go and keep an eye out for me, Hedwig," he whispered, reaching up to stroke her wing and opening the window for her. He watched her slip through, her enormous white wings spreading and catching the air silently. When she was gone he closed the window and turned again to face the dark room. Sighing resolutely, Harry picked up his cloak from the trunk, slipping it around himself and disappearing. Ron's mouth was hanging open slightly as Harry breezed by, and he gave a faint twitch when their door closed quietly.

He was not surprised at all to see Fred and George waiting up for him in the common room, both dressed in black and looking dangerous.

"We were about to come and fetch you," Fred said seriously, standing up when Harry took off the cloak to greet them.

"I was waiting for Ron to finally fall asleep," Harry informed. "He's out now, let's hurry."

The three of them consulted the Marauder's Map and slipped down through the halls of the silent castle quickly. In less than ten minutes they were sprinting across the grounds, their breath coming out as rhythmic, misty puffs in the frigid air. Despite himself, Harry was nervous. His heart was beating fast and loud—he knew it was adrenaline and nerves rolling around with each other in there. They

made it to the front gate of the pitch, and Fred peered about looking for signs of Malfoy.

"Right on time, Potter."

They turned to see the white skin of their enemy move away from the darkness of the trees he stood under, his cold blue eyes glinting in the faint light of the half-moon. Two other shadowy figures emerged from the darkness as well, perhaps not as smoothly. They were Crabbe and Goyle, looking tired but ready. Draco stood still and regarded Harry coolly. Harry stared right back. He knew the cold was making his cheeks red and his ears were numb, but he did not allow it to sway him. Fred and George looked at Crabbe and Goyle as if they were flies for the swatting, which gave Harry an extra boost of confidence. Malfoy didn't stand a chance.

"Well, what are we waiting for, ladies?" Fred quipped. "Let's not hang 'round here all day." He reached up and grabbed hold of the iron bars, climbing over first. Once down George followed, then Harry, then Draco followed slowly by Crabbe and Goyle. Harry realized that he had forgotten to ask what kind of plan the twins had for distracting teachers just in case, but seeing as how they were down here already, he decided to trust that they had taken care of it. He thought he heard Hedwig's hooting off in the distance, but upon looking above he saw no sign of her.

The wind had picked up but died down again after a great swell that whipped Harry's hair all over and tilted his glasses. He resisted the urge to shiver. Everything was dark. The huge stands loomed, the grass felt stiff and frozen under his feet. The air was heavy.

Harry took off his cloak and steeled himself against the cold. The duel books had told him that it was better to have himself free of long flowing robes or extra garments so he could move better. Draco seemed to know this as well, because he took off his and tossed it to Goyle. He was wearing a wand holster, the thin leather pouch tucked away under his arm, held in place by the straps that swept across his chest and back.

"Brought a little backup, did you Malfoy?" Fred said, jerking his head dismissively at Crabbe and Goyle, who looked like they would so rather be warm in their beads, snoring happily. "Afraid to face Harry alone?"

"And what are you doing here, Weasel?" Draco scoffed.

"We knew you'd be a little coward and bring your brutes along," George answered smoothly. "So we came to make sure you got your arse handed to you fairly."

"Sweet. Potter's got babysitters. Where's your mommy? Oh yeah, that's right...she's six feet under."

Harry whipped out his wand and aimed it at Draco without thinking. The other boy did the same, unsheathing his swiftly, his eyes narrowing with contempt.

"Easy, there, boys." George stepped between them. He looked from one to the other; his face flushed from cold but lit up with excitement. He cleared his throat and said seriously: "Wizards at the ready." Harry stood up straight and lowered his wand. Draco did the same. "Bow."

With an amount of difficulty, the boys bowed to each other. This wasn't Lockhart's dueling club. There were no teachers around and politeness was unnecessary and unwanted. George watched them straighten up again and then stepped away, walking over to join his brother on one side of them. They glared over Harry and Draco's heads at Crabbe and Goyle, who paced the other side.

A heavy silence befell them. Harry used the small window before George spoke again to clear his mind and find his center of magic. He felt his wand hand vibrating slightly, and he raised it, his blood pumping through him and numbing him to the icy weather. He was ready.

Draco glared across at him, his own wand hand shaking too, but from nerves, probably. Harry new the other boy was afraid of him. He felt very calm just then, his own nerves having dissipated.

"Kick his arse Harry," George coughed under his breath, and then said loudly and sharply: "Ready? Fight!"

"EFFRACTUM!"

Harry's mouth was open but Malfoy had been quick and seconds later he felt the bone in his left bicep splinter and he cried out in pain. It had hurt a lot when he broke his forearm nearly three years ago, but this time the pain only filled him with rage and he bellowed "INCURSUS ARTUS!" violently throwing a stream of bright red light at Malfoy's face that hit him with such force that it knocked him off his feet.

As Malfoy rolled around on the frigid grass, holding his face, Harry breathed in and out heavily and began pacing. His mouth was watering from the immense pain in his arm, but he glared down at his opponent, suddenly aware that now was no time for weakness. So Malfoy wanted to fight, eh?

"Get up! Get up, Malfoy!" Harry held his injured arm at his side, seeing Fred and George's tense figures near him but not focusing on them. He felt saliva inch its way over his lip but he paid it no attention. His arm was killing him. Malfoy stopped rolling around and his hands left his face to reveal a ghastly purple bruise the size of a large hand.

He snarled at Harry and jerked his wand up. "Petrificus Total--!"

"Protego!" Harry was ready for him this time, and the spell was sent crashing away by his shield. He wasted no time reacting. "BOMBARDA!" He threw the spell that usually blasts doors off their hinges at Malfoy and the boy was propelled five feet in the air, landing again with a loud thud. Harry distinctly heard a cry and seconds later Malfoy was holding himself at the ribcage, grimacing in pain. Harry felt a sort of curious high watching this, and he licked his glistening lips as he smiled.

"Come on, then. Get up!"

To his surprise, Malfoy did get up, albeit slowly. He held his hand to his right ribcage, taking in pinched breaths. His face was almost black from the blow Harry's earlier curse had delivered. "Is that the best you can do, Potter?" he winced at the pain in his ribs but managed to glare over at Harry. "My father taught me how to duel, and he taught me that a wizard should never use all his best moves first! Not smart wasting those gems so early in the game."

"Your father's a smudge on my arse, Malfoy! Stop talking and fight!" Harry yelled viciously, the throbbing in his arm driving him with madly brutal energy that he was prepared to use. Despite his broken arm, he got into Dueling Stance number Two, his upside down V shaking as his hands shook with a combination of rage, freezing cold, and pain.

They advanced on each other, the cold air circling their bodies and making their movements stiff but purposeful. Malfoy's blue eyes glinted dangerously and Harry met them head on.

"Affligo!" Harry shouted, his wand shooting a powerful force of blue magic right into Malfoy's stomach. The boy doubled over from the blow and looked as if he might fall, but righted himself immediately.

"Diffindo!" Harry felt a gash open up on his cheek, just below his right eye. He growled and threw the same spell right back at the blond boy, ripping open his pants leg and tearing the flesh in his shin.

"Your father taught you to duel? I guess that explains why you're so bad at it!" Harry deflected a curse with his protection shield and backed up as Malfoy got to his feet. They circled each other, their wands at the ready.

"At least I still have a father! Protego!" Malfoy narrowly missed getting hit with another Incurus Artus. "And a mother, come to think of it."

"Yeah, you're one big happy family," Harry snarled. "Except Daddy Malfoy thinks you're a useless coward!"

"Shut your fucking mouth, Potter! INCENDIO!"

Harry looked down to see the grass at his feet catch on fire. He jumped back and shouted the incantation to put it out, the smoke billowing in the cold wind. Crabbe, Goyle, Fred, and George were looking on warily, their eyes plastered to the pair and their wands held tensely at their sides. Harry resumed his dueling position, trying to force the pain in his arm out of his mind and concentrate on Malfoy, who looked bruised and bloody but not defeated.

"How's the arm, Potter?" the other boy said now.

"Just fine." Harry answered through clenched teeth. He saw Malfoy move suddenly, and jerked his wand hand out but no spell came his way. Malfoy laughed and Harry realized that he had fallen for a bluff.

"Keeping you on your toes, Potter..."

"Oh yeah? Is that what you were doing for Angelina when you attacked her?" Malfoy lost his smile. Harry felt his heart pulsing, saw Draco's face changing, and had erected a shield around himself before the curse hit him. He countered with a hex he'd learned from Battle Charms, shooting it right at Draco's face again. The stinging hex hit him right in the eyes and he dropped his wand and fell to his knees, yelling in pain.

Harry did not have time to celebrate the victory (getting the wand out of the opponent's hand was the goal of a duel like this, 'else they killed each other)—he was hit with a nasty Impediment Jinx and flew back several feet, landing painfully on his back. Harry's mind automatically went to Umbridge and he felt a sickening dip in his stomach as he lay still for a few seconds and then struggled up again. There was no teacher in sight—the spell had come from Crabbe, who was now glaring at him as he knelt over Draco.

"Oi! What the hell do you think you're doing?" Fred yelled angrily, advancing on Crabbe and Goyle with his wand drawn.

"Get back, Weasley!" Goyle shouted. He raised his shaky wand hand and aimed it uncertainly.

Draco moaned below them, still on his knees, doubled over with his hands over his eyes. Harry got to his feet and began walking towards the crowd, staring at Draco with satisfaction.

"No, you lower your wand, Crabmeat. And you too Goily. Or George and I'll blast ya one." Fred jerked his head to George, who was now beside him. Draco moaned still. Harry stood beside the twins and glared over at them, his arm sliding in and out of terrible pain. He knew that he should do something about it soon, but truthfully he had no idea how to mend the bone and that made him a little nervous.

"Duel's over," he said quietly, his breath fogging and then disappearing in the cold night air. "Malfoy's hurt, you should probably get him out of here."

"You cheated!" Goyle shouted. "You hit him in the eyes, that's not fair!"

"Shut up, idiot, Harry won, so--!" George's retort was interrupted by Crabbe's clumsy spell work. For his freckles suddenly started growing large and red, and they kept growing; spreading over his face until it too was a fleshy reddish color that made him look like he was covered in thin fur.

"That's done it, you troll!" Fred shot a spell at Crabbe and suddenly the boy sprouted large, gray ears. Harry recognized this effect immediately and sure enough the teeth came next, followed by the thick, black tail that ripped through the seat of the boy's pants and began swishing to and fro. Crabbe yelled angrily but it turned into a hideous neighing sound and he clamped his hand over his mouth. His hand slid off of those enormous teeth and, giving an enraged "HEEE HAWWWWW!", he lunged himself at the twins, right over Draco's head.

He got George around the waist and they hit the ground. Goyle gave a lurch (no doubt to go and help his friend) but Fred had been swift—for the boy took one step and then rocketed back off his feet as if he'd been punched hard in the face. "Ha harr!" Fred roared, smiling evilly. "Get up then, you big tub! Go on!"

Harry spared a laugh with Fred, watching as Goyle tried several more times to advance on them, each time being slapped back by the jinx. His round face was red with anger and purple from the blows at the same time. George and Crabbe were still wrestling on the frigid grass behind them...Harry was going to go and help, but as he turned he felt a slight woosh of air and seconds later Draco had him on the ground. Harry's arm screamed in pain as he was roughly turned over on his back and forced to hold the other boy at bay by pushing his hands into his chest with all his might. His wand was somewhere near his head. Draco's eyes were red from the stinging hex, but ablaze with fury. And...for a snotty little whelp he was surprisingly strong...

"You wanna know what I did to your little girlfriend, eh Potter?" the Slytherin growled. He was pushing himself on Harry with unrelenting strength that surprised the green-eyed boy. Harry grunted and sucked in his breath—his broken bone felt as if it would shatter if he couldn't get this arsehole off of him soon. Draco leaned in.

"I already know, Malfoy." Harry gritted, pushing through the pain and trying to move his body so he could get his knee in a good position. "You've got a crush on her? You tried to kiss her? I'll bet she laughed at you and you...couldn't...arrggh...take it!"

He kicked Draco off of him and immediately whipped around to grab his wand. Draco went for his own and, the twins and Crabbe and Goyle forgotten, their duel resumed—this time with a brutal edge that made Lockhart's little club look like child's play. They shot spells at each other without regard for either one's safety and more than once Harry had to wonder whether or not this was really about Angelina at all but about the simple fact that they hated each other with a passion.

Always had...and probably always would.

He didn't have much time to think more on this notion, for he had been hit with Malfoy's viciously thrown hex that felt as if he were getting a swift kick in the face. Harry fell to the ground, his nose feeling crushed and throbbing numbly. He knew there was blood running down over his mouth and chin, and he touched a shaking hand to it. When he drew his fingers back they were indeed stained

with bright red blood. Harry glared up at Malfoy, wiped the blood from his face with the sleeve of his jumper, and got to his feet.

He took aim. Malfoy was ready to deflect, but Harry had no plan to hit him directly. He had just been kicked in the face; his nose was probably broken; and his boiling contempt was rising. His wand vibrated...he concentrated hard...the pulsing power within him surged forth and he shouted "Terra Motus!" The ground beneath Malfoy's feet gave a startling lurch and the boy lost his balance. Harry lost no time before whipping his wand in a circle, drawing on another spell he learned, and causing the other boy's body to whip around in the air just like Harry's wand. He twirled around like a human lasso and then fell hard again to the earth with a sickening "oof!" that Harry knew had knocked the wind clean out of him. When he was on the ground, Harry sprinted forth and was on top of him in seconds, driving his fist into the pale face as hard as he could. Malfoy reacted by jabbing his wand into the flesh on Harry's broken arm, and he convulsed with the agonizing pain, growling and falling back.

A few feet away from them, George and Crabbe were still fighting—George's face looked like a red fur ball, and Crabbe had also sprouted thick gray fur to go along with his ears, teeth, and tail. The angry neighing sounds could be heard every now and then. Goyle had managed to get his hands on Fred, despite the repeated invisible blows to the face. His features were all mashed together angrily, his skin red and flushed from being hit, but he was determined to thrash the holy hell out of George's brother.

Harry got Malfoy back for his arm by lunging his foot out and catching the other boy in his shin. Malfoy cried out and hit Harry with an Everte Statum that caused him to turn over and over bodily in the air until he touched ground hard, injuring his shoulder. Gritting through the pain, Harry flicked his wand viciously at Malfoy, causing the other boy's own wand arm to bend back unnaturally until he cried out in agony from the strain. Harry would've been content to break the arm if a wayward shot from Crabbe's wand hadn't cut across him. He erected a shield around himself and the red light bounced away, but seconds later Malfoy was on top on him again.

"Arggh! I'm going to kill you Potter!" Malfoy bellowed, hobbling up on his injured leg and using his other to kick at Harry.

He was about to try and drive his foot into Harry's face for real this time when someone shouted: "HEY! WHAT IN BLEEDIN' HYPOGRIFFS ARE YOU KIDS DOING OUT HERE?"

Everyone froze. Harry turned his bloody face towards the booming voice and saw a rather large, bulky figure standing at the gate with a lantern hanging limply at its side. He could tell it was Hagrid without the benefit of the light. He felt a swell of both relief and blind panic fill him as Hagrid raised the lantern, revealing his face; which looked as if he too had been fighting among the boys on the pitch; and that thick mound of bushy black hair. He shook the creaky thing at them, the light bouncing across his bruised features.

"Fred? George? Malfoy? HARRY?" Hagrid did a double take upon sight of Harry and his mouth dropped open. He looked as if he were about to say something cutting, but just then Crabbe gave an involuntary "hee hawww!" and Hagrid jumped, startled by the sudden noise. "And blimey who're these two?"

"Hagrid, you're back..." was all Harry could think to say as the large man made his way across the field towards them all, looking very tired and very abused, but very angry. Harry stood up shakily, ignoring Malfoy at his side, and wiped at his bleeding nose again with his sleeve. His arm throbbed intensely, his adrenaline keeping the pain from overwhelming him.

"Yes, I am, but righ' now I'm lookin' at the lot of you wondering what in bloody hell is goin' on 'round 'ere! Why are you boys outta yer beds this time o'night, Harry?"

Everyone slowly let go of their fighting positions. Fred let go of Goyle's leg and picked up his wand again. George stood up from the ground, where he'd had his knee in Crabbe's belly and was about to hex him. Crabbe snorted through his now enlarged nostrils and got up too. He was actually turning into a donkey, and Harry wondered absurdly if Hagrid could use him in a Care of Magical Creatures class.

George's face was still red and fury and he lowered it slightly so that his hair obscured it somewhat.

"Look at yer face!" Hagrid went on, jabbing the lantern at Harry to examine the cut under his eye and his bloody nose. He didn't seem to be thinking about his own face—he had a black eye the size of an apple and more nasty-looking cuts and bruises that made him look very gruesome. "What is going on here? Explain yerselves! Now!"

"Potter started it," Draco said quickly, wincing from the pain in his ribs. "He attacked me, and look those two hexed my friends!"

Crabbe neighed softly in agreement.

"You bloody liar!" Harry countered, ready to tackle his enemy despite Hagrid's presence. "You started it the moment you touched my girlfriend and if you don't shut up I'm gonna--!"

"Whoa! Easy, there Harry!" Hagrid had stuck out an enormous arm to stop Harry, for the boy had taken a threatening step towards Malfoy with every intention of thrashing him senseless. "Goodness, look at you! What's the meaning of all this? I came back from a very long journey and the last thing I need a'the mo' is a handful of crazed students abou' ter tear each other apar'!"

Hagrid looked from one face to the other, his anger scarier than any of theirs. Harry took a deep breath and opened his mouth to explain the situation when out of his peripheral vision he saw lights flicker on in the dark face of the castle. His heart lurched.

"Oh no. Fred, look!" Fred turned his gaze to the direction Harry had indicated and cursed under his breath. "Tell me you've got something--!" Harry's frantic inquiry was halted as Fred took off running.

"Wha'the? HEY! COME BACK 'ERE!" Hagrid started after the twin but Harry jumped in front of him.

"Hagrid, listen you've got to go back to your cabin, okay? Just pretend you didn't see any of us."

He realized that he was including Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle in his pleas, but just then he only wished to avoid capture by Umbridge and if that meant saving them too so be it.

“But look at the state you’re in! I can’t just--!” Hagrid took a step after Fred, but Harry persisted, though even if he didn’t have a broken arm, pushing at the enormous man would do little good. “Harry, stop it! I’m takin’ you to tha hospital wing, the lot of ya, and you’re gonna answer to Dumbledore--!”

“No, you don’t understand, Dumbledore isn’t who we answer to anymore!” George joined Harry in blocking Hagrid’s way.

“What? Now that’s preposterous, git outta my way, I gotta catch your brother!”

“No, Hagrid let him go, he has to stop Umbridge! If she catches us down here we’re goners, and you too!”

“Who in the blue blazes is Umbridge?” Hagrid brushed Harry to the side with his typical heavy-handed force and Harry gave a sharp intake of breath, the searing pain seizing him momentarily. “Harry, is your arm broken?”

“Potter’s right,” Malfoy gritted, looking as if it pained him something awful to be agreeing with his mortal enemy. He also looked panicked though, and Harry knew he was probably thinking of what his father would do to him if he was thrown out of school. Hagrid stopped walking and turned to peer at the other boy, his lantern shining at the grisly-looking black bruise that covered the whole left side of Malfoy’s face. “She’ll expel us all. And that idiot Weasel is running right towards the castle!” Malfoy’s gaze shifted from the castle beyond to Harry.

“Shut up, Malfoy.”

“No, all of ya be quiet!” Hagrid interrupted, his voice shaking them out of their stand off. “Now I may have been away, but I’m still a bloody

teacher and I'm marching you all straight up to the castle to sort this mess out! That boy's got a tail, for Merlin's sake!"

He was about to yell at them some more but a loud POP! BANG! took the words right out of his mouth and they all turned to see, to their utter astonishment, that a huge fireworks display had been set off on the grounds. Bright reds and greens and yellows popped and fizzed and zoomed in the sky, lighting up the dark net of trees to their left and causing many little lights to flicker on in the castle to their right. The many swirls of color seemed to be moving into a pattern, and as they all stared at it in amazement, the pattern formed the likeness of Delores Umbridge looking especially ridiculous with an oversized round face and an enormous rear end. The giant, glittering words EAT POOP were spelled out over her head.

"Yeah!" George gave a whoop and beamed proudly at the ghastly and quite funny formation above their heads.

"Hagrid go back to your cabin! She's gonna come down here; you'd better not be around when she does!" Harry yelled, not waiting for the man to react but turning and sprinting off towards the tunnel that led to the locker rooms. "Come on, George, we have to hide!"

George started after him, followed by Crabbe, Goyle, and Malfoy.

"COME BACK HERE, YOU LITTLE--!" Hagrid bellowed after them, but they were all gone in a mad dash to find shelter in the dark tunnel.

"Don't tell her you saw us!" George called back before they all disappeared down into the darkness.

Hagrid sputtered and stamped his foot, his lantern shaking creakily on its hinges as he watched them all go. He stood there for a moment longer, torn between going after them and going to see what all the fuss was about over this Umbridge person. He heard Fang barking loudly and the call of angry voices in the distance. Heaving a great, exhausted sigh, Hagrid turned and lumbered back across the pitch and through the gate, the glittering light from the giant Umbridge and her EAT POOP muting the light from his creaky lantern.

Chapter Twenty-Four: I Hate You

Harry slid to the floor in the cool Ravenclaw locker room, breathing hard; sweat was pouring down his forehead despite the bitter cold he'd just escaped from. Draco did the same across the room; his own face was looking quite ghastly now that the large black bruise had spread to cover his entire left side. It looked like an oil stain, and the sweat that was coming out of his pores made it glisten eerily in the light coming from the windows.

There was only a long wooden bench to separate them.

They had split up somehow in their panic to escape from the pitch, and now Harry had no idea where George, Crabbe, and Goyle were. He hoped that they were in one of the changing rooms down the tunnel. Mostly, though, he hoped that Hagrid had made it back to his cabin and Fred had made it to safety before Umbridge came marching across the grounds to find the culprit responsible for those fireworks.

The two boys breathed, but did not speak. They could hear, in the distance, the fireworks still popping and whizzing. The shadows and flickering lights seemed to be moving, and Harry thought the twins must've designed them so they would float all around the castle, still in formation, so that everyone could see what they'd done. He could just picture Hermione watching the giant Umbridge float past her window, comprised of fizzing, multicolored fireworks.

Harry's arm was caught in a perpetual rhythm of immense pain and dull throbbing that came in intense waves, and he really wanted to get back to the castle soon to ask Hermione to mend it for him. There was no way he was going to the hospital wing. He had almost forgotten about Malfoy until he spoke finally, breaking the silence.

"Look what you've done to my face, Potter." He was gingerly touching the tender skin of his black cheek, wincing slightly. "What the hell was that spell you threw at me?"

"You broke my arm, Malfoy," Harry responded without sympathy. "Don't expect me to feel sorry for you."

"Oh I don't," despite the bruise, Draco managed a bitter little smile. "And don't expect me to feel sorry for you when you're expelled."

"What did you just say?"

Draco turned his face to the window and nodded at it, dropping his hand from his cheek and resting it on his knee. "Oh you heard me. Nice try with the ape out there, but you shouldn't have sent him away. He might've been able to stick up for you. I'm going to tell Umbridge that you shot off those fireworks and when I tried to stop you, you did this to me."

He said it with such casualness, his intention to finally see Harry chucked out, that it didn't register right away. It was a step behind Harry's actions, this remark, and the only thing that drove him was the sheer gall behind it.

Harry kicked the bench between them sideways, sending it grinding across the floor and into a group of lockers as he leapt up from the floor and seized Draco by his shirt. He brought the other boy crashing up against the lockers at his back and slammed him into them so hard that he was sure he had made a dent. Draco tried to aim his wand but Harry grabbed his arm before he could and slammed him back again.

"I've got a better idea!" Harry yelled, swinging Malfoy around brutally and throwing him into the lockers he himself had been leaning against seconds before. "How about we finish what we started on the pitch? I think we were about here!" Before he could stop himself, and before Draco could properly gather his wits to fight back, Harry drew his wand and shouted "Everte Statum!"

His own spell used against him, Draco's body twirled up and up and he flew back into the lockers again before hitting the ground hard on his back, knocking the wind out of him. He whimpered in pain, his half-black face contorted. Harry remembered the incantation for the hex Draco had delivered to his nose earlier and applied this to the boy's stomach and crotch.

Draco doubled over and curled up on the floor, holding his groin with shaking hands, breathing in and out in great watery gulps. Despite this, he managed to utter: "My f-father will..."

"What was that?" Harry shouted, shaking with anger. "You had no problem facing me out there with your goons around Malfoy, don't tell me you wanna run to your father now. Pick up your wand!" Harry kicked Draco's wand at him and it slid across the floor, stopping short of his elbow. Draco looked down at it and then up at Harry with a complete mixture of fear and hatred. Harry stood waiting. He no longer cared about what was happening outside. He could very faintly hear shouting, but from whom or from where it was coming he could not tell. Didn't matter.

Draco picked up his wand and got shakily to his feet.

They were in a space no bigger than a small classroom, surrounded by lockers and wooden benches—sealed in with each other, the lights from the fireworks turning their faces shades of pink and purple and orange and green. The distant POP! WHIZZ! ZING! echoed in the quiet. Harry's lips and chin were covered in dried, cracking blood. Draco looked so very pale on one side of his face, probably from the blow to the groin he'd been given, but his blue eyes shimmered.

"What are you gonna do, Potter? Kill me?"

"Thought crossed my mind."

Draco's face trembled into a look of distaste. "Over a girl?"

Harry knew that once again Draco was calling his bluff. He knew also that deep down he could not actually kill this boy. But he could hurt him. He could make sure that Draco Malfoy knew that the days of messing with Harry Potter had come to an end. He could make it so that this foul git understood that Harry was no longer going to just roll over and allow him to trample all over his friends or those he cared about.

"Do you want to bow?" Harry asked aloud now, the sarcasm dripping from his voice.

"Let's get on with--"

"Harry! I found it!" George came crashing into the locker room; his face was still a red fur ball and drenched in sweat, but it was lit up with a grin so wide he looked almost crazed with triumph. He was holding something up in his hand, shaking it at Harry, his eyes gleaming.

"Found what?" Harry did not take his eyes off of Malfoy. He wanted so badly to hex him, but George had come bounding up to him, breathing hard and shaking whatever it was he had found. Malfoy, however, was looking at George rather intensely, and he lowered his gaze from George's excited face to what was in his hand. Harry caught him just before he was about to hit George with a hex. "Expelliarmus!"

A split second later George had produced his wand and aimed it at the little punk, shouting: "Incarcerous!"

Malfoy, who had been disarmed by Harry—his wand flying out of his hand and hitting the wall with a thin clatter—was then bound tightly where he stood with rope that had appeared out of nowhere. "Damn you, Weasel! Let me out of this, now! When Umbridge hears about it...!"

Deciding that simply binding him bodily was not enough to shut him up, Harry tilted his head, fixing Malfoy with an unimpressed gaze, and uttered: "Silencio."

Draco's yelling immediately stopped and though his mouth moved, no sound came out. He shut his mouth defiantly and glared at them. The side of his face that was not black and bruised became red with anger and he struggled, banging his back against the lockers and twisting and writhing all around to get free. There was no use, of course, and when they were both satisfied with this, Harry turned back to George. "Nice work. You'll have to teach me that some time."

"Same to you, mate." George nodded, still eyeing Malfoy spitefully. "I'll show you that if you teach me that lasso move you did out there. Where'd you learn that, anyway?"

"I did a lot of reading today," Harry explained quickly, frowning. His eyes settled on what was in George's hand. "What have you--?" It was Harry's turn to gape. After so long of suspecting – of knowing – where it was, and how it had gotten there, Harry finally had it in his sights again, and he didn't need for George to explain where he'd gotten it. But he asked in an excited whisper: "Where did you get this?"

It was Angelina's playbook.

In the background, Malfoy's struggling had ceased. He was now gazing at them, his eyes fixed forbiddingly on the book in enemy hands. Harry glanced over at him before reaching out and taking the book from George. The twin explained, in one long breath, that he had chased Crabbe and Goyle as they tried to flee to the Slytherin locker rooms. Once there, he'd been double-teamed.

"Those knobs—they're big, but slow. I managed to hit 'em with good body binds and they're in there on their backs." He let out some raspy laughter. "Crabbe's tail is getting crushed; don't think he's very comfortable right now..." He went on to explain that he noticed where he was once the goons were down and an idea blinked in his head. Malfoy's locker was not hard to locate. "His name is stenciled on it in gold trim, the git. Pomposity at its worst, but his stupid jinx was easy enough to deflect (actually I think it might have bounced off one of the lockers and hit Goyle but I didn't stay to look)."

Harry gave a tired laugh, opening the book and seeing Angelina's small, neat handwriting. He flipped through a few pages, finding without difficulty the spots where Malfoy or Montague had scribbled in notes of their own on her plays. He recognized the Slytherin captain's writing from seeing it on notes that Snape had signed giving the pitch to the Slytherin team for practice. He clenched his jaw, aware of Malfoy's now vicious silence behind him. He found a page in which Angelina had drawn a dozen little images of him, all in various stages of flying. There was one that had him hanging upside down on his

broom, a ridiculous grin on his face. Only someone had written in “Potter eats dung!” and drawn a steaming pile of the stuff just under his head, so it looked like he was smiling because he could smell it. On the next page the half-finished portrait Angelina had drawn of him had been crossed out. It was rather bizarre to see his own face blinking back at him, one of his pupils devoid of ink and half his hair missing. Just above that, where Angelina had drawn herself and Harry kissing, someone had drawn an arrow sticking out of Harry’s back. There were more arrows puncturing the little hearts that Angelina had drawn floating above their heads. He scoffed. Childish, he thought angrily. It pissed Harry off to imagine that that bunch of sneaky, malicious Slytherin punks making fun of him and Angelina, but even more irritating was the knowledge that Malfoy was jealous because he wished to be the person Angelina had drawn herself kissing on these pages.

Harry knew there was more; especially judging from the daggers Malfoy was shooting in their direction with his eyes; but he had seen enough for the moment. He slammed the book shut and turned to Draco, a bitter smile playing at his bloody lips.

“We haven’t got much time, mate,” George said, wiping his sweaty brow with his sleeve. “Let’s beat the shite out of him now so we can get the bloody hell out of here.”

Draco’s eyes grew wide with fear and anger and he began struggling some more against Harry’s ropes, opening his mouth and closing it again as if he would like nothing more than to give them both a good verbal lashing.

“What was that you were saying about getting me expelled, Malfoy?” Harry asked his enemy, ignoring George’s statement. Draco narrowed his eyes at Harry but could not respond. “I thought so.”

George laughed again. “Shall we leave him?”

“To try and lie on us to Umbridge? No.” Harry took a step towards Draco, feeling very powerful with Angelina’s book in one hand and his wand in the other. “No I’ve got a better idea.”

Draco mouthed, “Oh yeah, and what’s that Potter?”

“I knew you’d stolen this. And now I have proof. Your handwriting—and Montague’s I might add—is all over it.” Draco started, looking as if he wanted to ask how Harry knew his handwriting, but he had no way of doing so. His voice was gone and all he could do was stand there. “So I’m going to be giving this back to Angelina, now. But if you so much as look in her direction again, I’ll take it straight to McGonagall. Not even Umbridge can ignore what’s in this.”

“You stole it from my locker!” Draco mouthed angrily. “That’s a violation of my priva--!”

“You stole it first, you little snot!” George said loudly. “And you’re not on Umbridge’s good side anymore, so don’t think you can lie your way out of this one.”

Malfoy only glared at them.

Harry tucked Angelina’s book into the back of his jeans and reached down to pick up Malfoy’s wand. He slipped this down into his front pocket and reached out, grabbing Malfoy by one of the ropes binding him and turning him roughly around to face the door. “Let’s go.”

He pushed Malfoy out in front of him and marched him with some difficulty down the tunnel towards the Slytherin changing room. His arm burned with pain at the slightest touch and the other boy struggled against him mightily but Harry threatened to turn him into an ass like Crabbe to get him to cooperate begrudgingly. Crabbe and Goyle were still laying stiff as boards on their backs on the floor. Harry saw no sign of the jinx on Malfoy’s locker on either of them, and concluded that it must’ve just hit somewhere away from them and died out.

“What about them, then?” George asked, rubbing his shoulder and wincing. The injury must’ve been from the attack the boys tried to spring on him in the locker room earlier.

Harry frowned at the pair of them, his eyes roaming over Crabbe. He gestured to the boy's struggling tail and big gray ears. "Can you fix him?"

George looked as if he'd rather not, but sighed and nodded. "Yeah..." He aimed his wand at Crabbe and muttered something under his breath. A second later the tail that was struggling to swish under Crabbe's weight disappeared and his ears and teeth began to rapidly recede until they were back to normal.

"What did you say?" Harry asked.

"Trade secret..." George shook his head disappointedly as the last of the Jackass Jinx faded. Malfoy stamped on Harry's foot and tried to dodge out of the room, but George caught him and dragged him back. A second later Draco was doubled over in pain from the swift fist to the belly the twin had delivered him.

"Thanks," Harry groaned at his throbbing toes and bent over to take the wands from Crabbe and Goyle. "Okay. Tractus Totalis."

The boys' muscles relaxed and they lay panting on the floor; Goyle's face was all red and pinched from being slapped in it repeatedly. Once they had recovered from being unable to move an inch, they got slowly to their feet, not looking as if they wanted to attack anybody else; especially not with Harry having both their wands and Draco being bound and silenced.

"We're going back up to the castle," Harry told them. "Are we gonna have any problems?"

Crabbe glared at him but shook his head. Goyle followed suit, glancing at Draco guiltily before lowering his gaze. Malfoy's nostrils flared and he rolled his eyes, opening his mouth to mime: "We'll be seen, you idiot."

Harry pushed past him and gestured for the others to follow. He had his Invisibility Cloak but it was not nearly big enough for them all and he didn't fancy the idea of Malfoy setting his eyes on it. He walked along the tunnel, feeling the cold again and trying to ignore Malfoy's

statement as long as possible. Once they reached the end of the tunnel he peered out cautiously into the darkness of the empty pitch. Nothing moved. Faint multi-colored light blinked at them every now and again from the fireworks. The shouting he had heard earlier in the Ravenclaw changing room was gone, now. Harry stood still for a moment, squinting at the grass of the field before turning to the rest of them, licking his lips unconsciously. He got the metallic taste of his own blood in his mouth and leaned over to spit it out bitterly. When he straitened up again he took a breath.

“Okay, I’m guessing that half the school is awake by now. Those fireworks were pretty loud and Umbridge probably screamed her head off when she saw them—brilliant by the way George.” George grinned and gave a little salute with his wand hand before aiming it at Crabbe and Goyle again. Harry shrugged. “So we’ll try to blend in...”

Malfoy gave an irritated twitch and mouthed furiously: “Are you mad? Look at us!”

“Shut up, Malfoy.” George shoved him sideways into the stone wall of the tunnel. “Though I have to say, you do look a ruddy mess, Harry.” He gestured at Harry’s bloody face, blood-stained sleeve, and wild hair.

“Well you’re one to talk.” Harry did likewise to George’s enlarged freckle. George tried his best to fling his red hair in his face, but that only made it look even further like a copper fur ball.

Harry quickly wiped at his lip and chin several times with his sleeve again, though he knew he’d only managed to smear the drying blood over his face even more. He smoothed down his unruly hair and rolled up his sleeves despite the bitter cold now making their breath puff out before their faces. Malfoy glared at him with a spiteful and amused gleam in his cold blue eyes but Harry ignored him. “It’ll have to do; if we move fast maybe we’ll get lost in the crowd.”

Harry admitted to himself, though not aloud, that this was a lame plan. He also allowed the fact that he was helping his enemies avoid expulsion enter his mind—but for this he had a ready justification: he was helping himself and George avoid expulsion. The fact that Malfoy

and his two flunkies were along was mere circumstance. He had to get them all to the castle and back to their common rooms without being seen or they were all toast—every single one of them. He did not want to give Umbridge the satisfaction of that, even if that meant saving Malfoy too. If Harry could remove himself from the situation and get safely back to the Gryffindor Tower and have Draco take the fall, he would, but he would be implicated no matter what he did, and it wasn't his style. And what is your style, he asked himself as they crept across the field single file. You did a brilliant job of teaching Malfoy a lesson, only last time I checked he didn't have a broken arm and a bloody nose. Harry gritted his teeth at the back of Draco's head as they made it to the gate and climbed over it one by one. I got him good, though. Look at his face! Harry was worried about someone noticing Malfoy's face. It was completely covered in the black bruise on his entire left side, making him look like he was wearing a mask.

"Just keep your head down, Malfoy," he muttered to the boy as they veered off the path leading up to the castle and trekked along the side of the steep incline that separated the way to Hagrid's cabin and the way to the green houses. Harry saw the other boy's jaw move and knew he was saying something snide, voiceless as he was.

They crept around the side of the castle, taking care to stay in the shadows, for Harry could see many windows lit up with golden light above their heads and knew that people were awake. He imagined that Umbridge's fireworks were making good progress around the other side of the castle. They had seen the tip of the 'P' in 'POOP' slipping round the edge of the Astronomy Tower as they walked. He hoped that people would be drawn to the windows on that side to follow its progress while they slipped in unnoticed.

Of course, they still had to find a way in, however.

"Hey!" George hissed on cue, sticking out an arm to stop them. Harry froze, panicked for a second that they'd been spotted, but then the twin gestured at a little square window ahead of them, sitting close to the ground and lit up with warm, flickering light. The window was set into the stone wall of the castle no higher than their shins, and Harry could sense movement within. He frowned at George. "The kitchens!" the redhead whispered.

Harry nodded, suddenly understanding. The elves would help them get back safely.

Shoving Malfoy ahead of him, Harry followed George, Crabbe and Goyle towards the little window. He could just make out little figures moving about through the glass in various directions and felt relief wash over him. He got down on his knees and pressed his hands to the cold window, his breath fogging it up slightly. He saw that several house elves were busy cleaning and cooking, and he fancied he could smell biscuits baking. Harry reached down and opened the window. The elves all stopped what they were doing, their large round eyes turning as one towards Harry as he stuck his head uncomfortably in. His nostrils were immediately caressed with the sweet smell of chocolate chip biscuits, but he ignored it and hissed at the nearest elf: "Can we come in?"

"Why, yes sir, of course you can!" squeaked the little elf, his round eyes wide with earnest welcome, despite the odd manner in which this visitor was entering their midst.

"Thanks!" Harry immediately began shoving the rest of his body in through the little window. He winced at the jolt of pain he got when he put pressure on his injured arm to bring his feet inside.

"You must be cold, master! Care for some hot chocolate?" The elf raised his tiny little hands to help Harry topple through. His peers began to gather round where they were, gazing up at Harry curiously, though politely.

Harry shook his head at the elf and turned to help George through. "No, thanks...er...what's your name again?"

"They calls me Pink, sir, though I don't really know why!" The elf answered sheepishly. Harry couldn't see anything pink on or about the creature, either.

"Well, no thanks Pink. We just need to come in through this window and get back up to our rooms without being seen. Do you know where Dobby is?"

"Dobby is here, Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby's hats appeared before he did, but Harry made him out among the crowd as Malfoy came crashing to the floor, still bound by the magical ropes. The boy cursed silently and kicked at the wall next to him viciously, causing several of the elves to hiccup with fright and scurry out of the way. George pulled him roughly to his feet again and Malfoy did not thank him for it.

"How can Dobby be of service, sir?"

"Can you help us get to our common rooms like you did for me that last time?"

Dobby's eyes narrowed at Draco for a moment before he whispered,
"Even mean Master Malfoy, sir?"

"Er...yes, even him Dobby. Please. I'm asking you."

"Of course, for Harry Potter, sir."

As they left the kitchens the elves insisted that they took some freshly baked biscuits and Harry's pockets were full of the warm, gooey things when he stepped out into the hall behind Dobby.

Angelina paced in the dark common room, feeling as if her nerves were going to jump out of her body.

She had been pacing up in her dorm but she found that her movement disturbed her roommates so she moved down here to walk about wringing her hands and cursing at herself under her breath. This was all her fault. She should've just told Harry what was going on with her from the off. Maybe he wouldn't have gotten so reckless in his anger. If she had simply just said that she thought Malfoy had attacked her for her playbook instead of taking his suspicions about rape and running with them, none of this would've happened.

But then she was just fooling herself.

She knew perfectly well that if all Malfoy wanted was to steal her stupid playbook, he wouldn't have resorted to Obliviating her.

Harry, headstrong Harry...he was defending her down there. What were they doing to each other? Didn't they care that it could all be over for them if someone noticed? It was a little over forty-five minutes past midnight and she got more and more nervous with each passing second. She wanted to go down there but she really didn't.

Just then she heard a noise, and she looked up to see Hermione walking down the steps from the girls' dorms, looking just as awake and nervous as Angelina felt.

"You can't sleep, either?" the bushy-haired fifth year asked unhappily. Angelina shook her head. "This is madness!" Hermione snapped, throwing herself on the chaise lounge and crossing her arms. "Harry has lost all capacity for rational thought! What is with him this year?"

Angelina sighed and sat down in an armchair near her. She stared at the empty fireplace. "I think it's me. I think I've driven him to it. I shouldn't have lied to him."

"Angelina..." Hermione was looking at her with such concern that it made her feel even more guilty. "What happened?"

"I don't know exactly. I just wish Harry hadn't found out before I could remember everything."

There was quiet for a while. Angelina could feel the passing seconds dredging along. She had the strongest desire to jump up from the chair and run as fast as she could down to the pitch and grab Harry from the awful fight she knew he was in the middle of. Tell him she was sorry. Hug him up and thank him for defending her. Just tell him...something other than what she had told him before. The look on his face when she said she had to think about things...what the hell was there for her to think about? She really wanted to be with him.

"I should have told him the truth..." she muttered to herself.

"I don't really think Harry would've left it up to you no matter what you told him," Hermione replied earnestly. "Ron and I even tried to talk some sense in him—he wouldn't listen to a word we said."

Angelina shook her head distractedly. “This is exactly what he wanted, damn him.”

“Malfoy?”

“Yeah....” Angelina scoffed at herself, feeling utterly ridiculous all of a sudden. “Harry is just as mad at me as he is at Malfoy.”

“He’s just a boy; he doesn’t know any better...” Hermione offered, shrugging. She had her wand with her and she lazily flicked it, muttering “Incendio...” so a bright crackling fire erupted in the fireplace. “If boys took the time to pay attention to things we’d all be a lot better off.”

“You and Ron haven’t gotten started yet, have you?” Angelina asked suddenly, casting a knowing glance at the other girl.

Hermione smiled sadly. “We’ve just gotten back to normal. He hasn’t mentioned what he did,” she explained, referring to the kiss. “And I haven’t heard back from Viktor yet.”

Angelina gave a wry smile, despite her mood. “Viktor Krum. Hmm, we all thought it was so interesting that he chose you to accompany him to the Ball.”

Hermione made a face. “Why?”

“Well...” Angelina gave Hermione a sort of appraising look. “You’re not like any of the girls who usually fall all over themselves around people like him. We just figured the two of you would never think twice about each other.”

Hermione looked thoughtful for a moment, and then sighed quietly. They sat in silence for a while, Angelina gazing at the fire but not really seeing it—she was thinking of Harry. Worrying for him. Stumbling footsteps could be heard coming from the boys’ stairs and seconds later Ron descended, looking sleepy but alarmed.

“They’ve left me! Have they left me?”

He rubbed his eyes groggily and the girls could see that he had dressed in haste—his robes were hanging off him in a sloppy fashion and he was missing a shoe. He held his wand in hand, however. Hermione walked over to him and took his hand, leading him towards where she'd been sitting. “You've missed them, and I'm glad for it,” she muttered, pushing him down onto the couch. He bounced a bit on the soft cushions, his mouth hanging open with disappointment.

“Why didn't Harry wake me?” he muttered, leaning back and closing his eyes as if he would fall back asleep right there. “I wanted to go...”

“Go and get yourself expelled? Good thinking, Ronald.” Hermione responded, sitting down next to him.

“Oh be quiet, Hermione.” Ron's eyes came open again and he frowned at her. “Harry's doing this for a good reason, you know. I don't get why you can't understand that. Weren't you listening to him at the last D.A. meeting? All that stuff he said about protecting each other...”

“He meant in the face of real trouble! Like a Death Eater attack or something, not blind, petty ego!”

“Listen, if you think Harry should've sat ‘round twirling his thumbs while Malfoy felt up his girlfriend--!” Ron was fully awake, now and he realized that he was talking about Angelina while she was sitting right there. He shut his mouth and looked over at her, his cheeks still flushed from his indignant speech at Hermione. “Sorry, Angelina...”

Angelina blinked at him but didn't respond. Hermione huffed and crossed her arms. “Well done, Ron.”

“I said I was sorry!”

Before Hermione could open her mouth to retort, Fred came bursting through the portrait hole, breathing like a troll and sweating bullets. Everyone jumped up from their seats at the sight of him, and Angelina rushed forth, her heart racing. “Fred, what happened?”

"I just made it!" Fred gasped, grinning crookedly despite his panting.
"Came this close to running into Filch on my way up here--!"

BANG!

Hermione screeched and flew into Ron's arms. Angelina turned around swiftly, her wide eyes landing on the window, where they could see multi-colored sparks flying around everywhere as the fireworks Fred had lit the fuse to now exploding into formation. The dazzling colors swelled before their eyes, muting all other light for a moment before popping back again with loud screams of sound.

"Oops, yeah and I had to set those off..." Fred added, drawing their attention back to him.

"Fred, what happened out there?" Angelina demanded, touching his face, which was hot from the running he had done. "Where are Harry and George? Were you caught?"

"No, not really. Well, yes, but--"

"You were?" Hermione gasped in horror. "Oh no!"

"Relax, Granger, it was just Hagrid." Fred reassured her, still breathing like mad from his excursions. The fireworks boomed and whirled outside, the lights hitting their faces in bright greens and blues.

"Hagrid's back?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, but I dunno if they were able to talk some sense into him. He was pretty fired up."

"Well I don't blame him, and now look what you've done!" Hermione walked over to the windows, where they could see the giant Umbridge with her enormous arse floating above the grounds in the distance. Hermione made a face that twisted from austerity to slight amusement upon sight of the huge 'EAT POOP' that glittered brightly above Umbridge's head. "Oh, really, how crass..."

"I think it's brilliant, meself..." Ron said simply. She actually smiled then.

They could hear commotion coming from the tops of the stairs, and knew that the loud fireworks had disturbed a lot of the others. Angelina grabbed Fred's arms and turned him to face her. "Where are Harry and your brother?"

"Down the pitch still, I think." He shrank back from her fiery glare, but she would not release him. "Harry warned me, I had to set off the--!"

"If Harry is caught with your brother out there I'll never forgive you!" she shouted at him. He set his jaw and shook himself from her grip. "Fred! Why did you guys have to go after Malfoy? I can take care of myself! Look at the mess you've made!"

"We didn't just do it for you, Angelina!" he yelled back. Kids were starting to descend upon them, now, their sleepy forms lumbering down the stairs from both the girls' and boys' dorms. "You don't understand, all right? This whole school has gone to the dogs! You think a little duel on the pitch is a big deal? You think Umbridge won't find some other way to chuck us all out? She's poison, she'll spread no matter what and Harry's right to stand up for himself!"

Hermione was making small shushing noises at him, trying in vain to get him to lower his voice, but Gryffindors were grouped all around them now, some of them torn between watching the fireworks and gazing at the argument in their midst.

"Fireworks aren't the worst I can do..." Fred glowered, heeding Hermione's warnings. Angelina stared at him, not willing to argue anymore. She knew deep down that he was right.

Dean stepped forward out of the crowd, Ginny close on his heels, and muttered: "Fred, what happened, mate?"

But Fred had no time to answer, for through the portrait hole strode Minerva McGonagall, dressed in her tartan nightgown, her long grayish red hair hanging down her back. She adjusted her spectacles

and surveyed them all, her stern expression illuminated by the popping fireworks.

"What is going on here?" she asked them. Fred stood panting, Angelina at his side looking distraught. Hermione was gripping Ron's arm, a pinched look on her face that could be mistaken for many things, guilt included. Ron simply blinked at the woman blankly. Everyone else did the same, all in their pajamas, all silent. She sighed heavily and adjusted her glasses again. "As you probably have noticed, someone--" her eyes fell particularly on Fred as she said this, "--set of fireworks over the grounds just now. I'll have to go and join Professor Snape and Professor Flitwick to dispose of them. I suggest you all go back to your rooms."

"But can't we watch them a little longer, Professor?" someone whined.

McGonagall did not shift her gaze from Fred, but she made no move to reprimand him in any way. She was on the point of answering the second year boy when they heard shrill yelling coming from outside the portrait hole: "Let me through this instant!"

"I've told you a hundred times, you must give me the password!"

"I did!"

"It's changed! Do you have the new one?"

"I DON'T NEED ANY 'NEW ONE'! I AM THE HIGH INQUISITOR AND I DEMAND--!"

McGonagall had gone in a flash, her tartan nightgown billowing in the breeze her swift movements made. She had stepped through and disappeared over the threshold in seconds. Angelina wasted no time.

"You left them on the pitch, didn't you?"

"Had no choice," Fred answered steadily. "But like I was trying to say before: the fireworks are a distraction. They'll be chasing Umbridge's fat arse all around the grounds, and it'll take the lot of them to take it

down. It's supposed to be coming this way soon, it'll draw them away from the pitch and Harry can get back safely..."

"I hope you're right, Fred..." Angelina took a deep breath and let it out. She posed the next question very carefully. "Are you...hurt?"

Fred shook his head and gave her a tired smile. "No." There was a heavy pause and then he added: "But Harry is, a little."

Angelina's heart sank.

They could hear more shouting through the portrait hole and this time students were torn between staring out the windows to laugh at the Umbridge made of flickering sparks and listening to the real Umbridge's heated row with their Head of House just outside. Once the voices died down, McGonagall came stomping back in, her face flushed with anger.

"Everyone off to your beds this instant!" Kids scattered everywhere, fleeing her wrath. Ron, Ginny, Hermione, Angelina, and Fred turned to flee too but she cleared her throat loudly. "You five stay put!" They halted in their tracks, turning around slowly to face her. She glared at them for a long time, the lights of Fred and George's fireworks steadily drawing nearer. "Where is Mister Potter?"

They all stood blinking at her stupidly, none of them prepared to offer an excuse.

"Er..." Ginny attempted. "Still asleep, ma'am?"

McGonagall offered a tart smile. "Oh you'll have to do better than that, Miss Weasley, because I've just come from a row with our so-called High Inquisitor, who is determined--to say the least--to search these premises for him and any evidence that he was responsible for that." She pointed a long, slender finger at the window, where they could see Stunning and Reductor spells zooming past to hit the ghastly display. They could faintly hear what sounded like Snape's irritated voice and a second later one of the P's in POOP had dissolved and blinked out. She turned her harsh gaze on Fred again. "When I know,

Mister Weasley, that you probably had a hand in this, and why you would risk yourself to that horrible woman's wrath is beyond me."

"I didn't do anything!" Fred reacted defensively but she silenced him.

"I do hope you realize that you are risking more interference by the Ministry. That woman will have another one of her loathsome decrees up at first light, this time to gain permission to search the very rooms where you sleep! Is that what you want?" She shook her head at him in disbelief, her incredulous gaze moving from him to each of them in turn.

"No, ma'am that's not what we want at all..." Hermione offered quietly.

"So you will kindly tell Potter to stop whatever it is he is doing and behave. The same goes for every single one of you!"

They could all only gape at her, gobsmacked by the fact that she was not chucking them all out, including the absent Harry, on the spot. She tightened her arms around herself, drawing the nightgown closer to her body, and looked at them funny for a moment as they muttered their obedience. Angelina fancied she saw the corner of the older witch's mouth twitch, like she was trying to suppress a smile.

"One has to marvel at the craftsmanship, I suppose..." she muttered, still looking at them in that funny way. "How long would it take...one...to design something like that?"

Fred hesitated, squinting suspiciously at her for a second, before shrugging. "Couple of months..."

"Well. Despite the obvious fact that it is completely against school rules and very disrespectful to our High Inquisitor--" her voice wavered on that phrase, like laughter was trying to ripple through against her will... "--it's a rather impressive bit of magic. Too bad it's being done away with so easily..." she nodded at the window again, where Umbridge's hefty bottom was being slowly cut down to size, the fireworks fizzing out when being it by Stunning Spells and Reductor Curses. McGonagall sighed. "I'd better go and help them.

Off to bed, all of you, and detention with me for the next week Weasley."

When she was gone again, Fred scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Hey, that's not a bad idea..." he muttered, seemingly unaffected by his sentence to a week in detention. "I'm gonna tell George; we need to figure out a way to make them resistant to Stunning Spells and such...or...ha! We could make them multiply and get bigger when those sods try to--!"

"You won't be telling George anything if he's caught out there with Harry," Ginny interrupted, flopping down on the couch and crossing her arms.

Fred's excited expression faded and he sat down next to her, followed by Angelina, Ron, and Hermione. He draped an arm around Angelina and squeezed her apologetically. She sighed and closed her eyes, resting her head on his shoulder.

"At least tell us what happened," Ron said from his position sitting cross-legged on the hearth rug.

"It was brilliant," Fred said, smiling again. Ron groaned, clearly upset at being left behind. "Harry hit Malfoy right in the eyes with a Stinging Hex!"

They had missed Snape by mere seconds. The kitchens were just on the other side of the dungeons where the Slytherin common room was, and Snape had swept past and out onto the grounds just as Harry and the others turned a corner that would've lead them right into his path. If Draco had realized this he probably would have run for it, but he looked hopeful still that they would run into the Potions Master while down here.

Dobby led them to the Slytherin common room, and just outside they stopped. "Shall I take you in the fire, Harry Potter, sir?"

"No, no that's okay, Dobby. These guys'll go in by themselves."

"What about my face, Potter!" Malfoy tried to yell at him. "And what you've done to my voice! LIFT THE CHARM!"

Harry found Malfoy's indignant sputtering quite amusing, but he had no idea what he was going to do about that giant bruise. He did not fancy the idea of allowing Draco to go to the hospital wing tonight. But he couldn't just ignore it—the thing was huge, and someone was bound to notice it the second he walked in the door. Crabbe and Goyle looked beat up and tired, but their sluggishness could more easily be passed off than Draco's disfigured face. Harry could just picture the little sod crying to Umbridge, claiming he was ambushed.

He really did not want to be helping this boy in any way, but nor did he want to be packing his trunk and heading off Hogwarts grounds forever tonight.

Clenching his jaw, Harry nodded: "Fine."

"Fine, what? Harry..." George gave him a warning look. He seemed to want to just chuck them in and be done with them, but they both knew they had to do it this way.

"We can't stand out here in the open. Maybe..." Harry tried to think. "Maybe Dobby, you could run and fetch something from Madame Pomfrey's..." he stopped, suddenly remembering something. "I've got it. We need to get up to Gryffindor Tower."

"I'm not leaving these sods to go and run to Umbridge, Harry," George growled.

"Then we'll take them with us, but we have to be careful. Just come on; let's not stand here any longer." Draco opened his mouth to protest, but George shoved him forward and they followed Dobby, who led them through a series of corridors that Harry had no idea existed. "Dobby...is this the way...?"

"Trust Dobby, Harry Potter. Dobby knows the way." The elf turned to beam up at him, snapping his little fingers so that a wall shifted aside for them, revealing a narrow staircase that winded up, up, up into the darkness. "Many secrets in this castle, sir...many, many...and Dobby knows them all, now."

Harry worried that Malfoy shouldn't be seeing this, but as he looked behind him he saw that the corridors and walls seemed to be changing even as they made their way forward, and did not look like where they'd come through before. He had no idea, even in his many adventures in these halls after curfew, that the castle was so vast and so complicated. Dobby snapped his fingers and torches sprang to light as they made their way up the twisting, winding steps. Crabbe and Golye panted, but being wandless they did not complain.

Up they climbed, until finally they emerged into a dark, dusty, empty corridor. Thick cobwebs hung from almost every corner, and the walls were covered in dust and dirt. The floor was so coated in the stuff that their footsteps did not even reveal the actual surface of what they were stepping on, only more dust. Dobby bounced along, turning his head every now and then to offer Harry an approval-seeking smile. Harry returned the smile distractedly, noticing that they were nearing an opening and could swear he saw the portrait of the fat lady just around the corner. He frowned.

This space they were approaching had never been open. It was near the large window that faced the staircase adjacent to the fat lady. It was solid wall, this was. Funny thing, though—they could see through it now. It was as though the wall had never been there.

"Dobby is this just like with the fireplace?" Harry asked, and the little elf nodded his hat-laden head.

They could hear raised voices, now. Dobby halted and Harry motioned for the others to do the same, turning and aiming his wand at Malfoy. He told the boy with his eyes that he would blast him if he made a move. George did the same to Crabbe and Goyle. Draco looked as if he were trying to strangle Harry with his gaze.

"I AM THE HIGH INQUISITOR AND I DEMAND--!" That was Umbridge. Harry's heart gave a lurch and his palms went sweaty, causing him to tighten his grip on his wand. He did not turn away from Draco.

"Just a second, Delores, why are you shouting at the fat lady?" McGonagall's voice.

"Minerva, have you seen--?"

"Yes, I have. I was on the point of getting my students back in bed when I heard you screaming out here like a madwoman."

"How dare you speak to me that wa--!" Harry knew Umbridge's face was probably beet-red and swollen like a pimple about to pop. He tilted his head at Draco in warning. The boy looked about ready to run for it.

"She wouldn't give me the password, Professor!" The fat lady spoke, now, sounding wholly offended. "I explained to her that I am forbidden to open without it, but she wouldn't listen."

"You were quite right to, Fat Lady." Minerva said gently.

"But I need to search this--!" Umbridge sputtered.

"Search?" Minerva's voice was high pitched and shrill now, just like Umbridge's but with a little more menace. "Search what? You cannot possibly mean that you intend to search my common room or any of my students quarters?" and she laughed at Delores, which Harry knew really pissed the fat toad off, like the other woman had gone mad to even suggest it.

"Yes. That is exactly what I intend to do. I know one of your students—specifically one Harry Potter and probably with help from his little hooligan friends—set off that ghastly display over the grounds!"

"And what proof do you have?" McGonagall asked fervently.

"The proof, Minerva, is in there! And I must say I consider your refusal to step aside quite treacherous!"

"Perhaps," McGonagall countered, her voice stiff and sharp as a blade. "It would be a better idea to search the grounds first. I believe your culprit may not have had time yet to flee the scene. The longer

we waste standing here, the more time he or she has to escape your good judgment, Delores.”

“I’ve already sent Professor Snape and others.”

“Good. I’ll join him, then.”

“But, the password, Minerva!” Umbridge snapped.

“Oh I thought I made myself clear—I’m not going to give it to you.” Umbridge sounded as if she were going to scream some more, but McGonagall cut her off. “I believe it was you, Delores, who told me not so long ago when I intended to search the Slytherin locker room for Angelina Johnson’s stolen property that our students’ privacy was not to be tampered with.”

“You-you...you...!” Umbridge sputtered, enraged.

“So...” Professor McGonagall sounded almost casual, now, as though they were discussing what time to meet for tea. “I feel no hesitancy whatsoever in telling you that my students’ quarters are their own private dwellings while they remain here at Hogwarts and searching any of them is out of the question.”

“Insubordination!” screeched Delores. “You-you’re on probation, Professor!”

“Very well. But either way, you won’t be coming in here tonight. Now if you’ll excuse me I must finish seeing my students back to their beds. They have classes tomorrow and I will not have them falling asleep during my quiz. I’ll be down on the grounds momentarily to help Professor Snape.”

Harry heard the fat lady creak open for the Professor, who must have merely mouthed the password silently. He heard a heavy “clack” and a frustrated grunt, guessing that Umbridge must’ve tried to hurry in after McGonagall and the portrait closed in her face. Seconds later he heard Umbridge’s heels clicking angrily on the smooth floor as she stomped away. McGonagall was frightening, but for the moment she was Harry’s hero.

They waited until she had left too before Harry crept along behind Dobby and, to their left, the portrait of the fat lady was in their sights. She was muttering huffily to herself, probably still upset over being shouted at by Umbridge. Harry stopped them again and turned to George. "Okay, I'll be right back. Stay here with them."

"Right. Hurry up, though."

Harry hesitated in leaving George alone with Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, but he had both their wands and his own was aimed with a steady hand. He looked ready to hex the hell out any of them who tried to mess with him. And besides, Harry reminded himself, he took on both Crabbe and Goyle in the Slytherin changing room and won.

Harry followed Dobby as he waved his tiny hand at the invisible wall, allowing them to walk through into the hall and they slid past the stone bust again. Harry once again found himself being led through a dark, on-stretching corridor and then turning sharply to walk down towards the fireplace in the common room. He saw the fire crackling and it warmed his chilled bones. Beyond it he could make out Ron's lanky body sitting cross-legged on the hearth rug, his back to them. As they drew closer he saw four other heads turned his way—one of them unmistakably Angelina's. They were talking. Harry could hear Fred's phonic voice, saying something about a Stinging Hex. Dobby snapped his fingers and the fire died out, causing Ron to turn and peer at them curiously, though Harry knew he couldn't see them.

They walked through, startling the wits out of everybody. Ron jumped up from the hearth rug and whirled around.

"Harry!" everyone seemed to cry at once.

He jumped hurriedly over the still burning embers and was besieged with questions, but above that there was Angelina rushing forth to hug him tight. Before he could stop her she had him in a grip that nearly toppled him with pain. He sucked in his breath and pushed away from her, squeezing his eyes shut to cope with the intensity of it as it coursed through his arm.

"Ow, ow don't touch my--!" he hissed, breathing hard.

"Goodness, Harry you're hurt really badly!" Hermione moaned, stepping towards him. "Oh, didn't I tell you to be careful?"

He looked from Angelina's distraught face to Hermione's and then to the rest of them, landing on Fred. Ignoring Hermione's question, Harry nodded at the other Weasley twin. "Thanks for the fireworks."

"No problem...where's George?"

"Oh he's waiting." Harry suddenly remembered himself and despite his agonizingly hurting arm, he squeezed Angelina's shoulder and said firmly: "I have something for you when I get back, okay?"

She opened her mouth but he didn't wait till she said 'okay' before he turned and swept past them all. He noticed despite his determination that they were all staring at his bloody face and dirty clothes, quite horrified, as he took the stairs up to the boys' dorms two at a time. His arm felt like it did not belong to his body. It was a burning, pulsing, heavy thing that quivered in pain with every step he took. He burst through the door to his room, where Dean, Seamus, and Neville were sitting on their haunches on Neville's bed staring at the fireworks and laughing raucously.

"Harry, mate, where've you been?" Dean asked in surprise as Harry went straight across the room to his trunk and flung it open, causing Hedwig to flutter indignantly at her perch on his headboard. "You look bloody awful. You been in a fight?"

"Something like that," Harry said distractedly, rummaging through endless clothes, quills, books, and junk until he found what he was looking for. Clasping his hand around the glass vial that Madame Pomfrey had given him when he'd gone down to ask her about treating crossed eyes, he scooped it up along with all the cotton balls that had come with it and slammed the trunk shut with his foot.

The other boys were calling to him but he waved them off and hurried out again.

As he jumped down from the last three steps back into the common room, Hermione said frantically: "Harry, wait, Fred's just told us your arm may be broken! You're hurt, slow down!"

"I'll be right back!" he called, already following Dobby back through the fireplace and out of sight again.

"Blimey..." Ron muttered. "You'd think he would stay put after narrowly escaping the way he did..."

Angelina gave a frustrated grunt and hopped over the fire grill, determined to follow him. She reached out and touched her hands to the stone back, which was very hot. And solid. Cursing under her breath she turned around again and allowed Ron to help her back over.

"If he gets caught now I'm going to kill him!"

Harry made it back to them and thrust the vial at Malfoy, who blinked at him blankly. "Here. Put it on your face. It gets rid of bruises."

Draco looked down at the vial and then back up at him, narrowing his eyes with distrust. "And how am I supposed to do that? Let me out of these bloody ropes!"

Harry couldn't decide if having Draco mouth everything passionately was more or less annoying than listening to him yell like the brat he was. They were all silent for a moment before Harry took a breath and drew back the vial, pulling his wand back out of his pocket. Malfoy watched him expectantly, but Harry did not release the ropes right away. Instead he fixed Draco with a stony stare, deciding that he wanted to make something clear first.

"Before I give you this, let's get something straight—I hate your slimy guts, Malfoy," he said matter-of-factly. Draco sneered and shook his head, his eyes conveying that he hated Harry right back. "Yeah, I know you hate me, too. So don't think because I'm helping you I'm soft, or I'll allow you to pull anything in the future." He reached behind him and pulled out Angelina's playbook from his jeans. Draco glared at it. "If Hagrid hadn't come, I would have been glad to keep going, and I think you know that." Draco merely stared at him. "Your father is

already cross with you. Don't piss him off even more by getting chucked out. You try to take me down, I'll take you right down with me. Got it?"

Draco gave no indication that he would comply, but Harry knew he would. Deep down Draco knew that Harry was right, and that he did not want any more trouble with his father. He probably loathed Harry immensely for having that glimpse into his private life. Harry also did not expect his leverage to last long, but he knew if he stood his ground and showed no signs of weakness, Malfoy would likely think twice about trying anything else for a long time.

"I've got friends, and I'm not stupid. You get in my face and I'll get right back in yours, Malfoy. If you want to keep trying to get me out, you better be warned...I don't go down easy."

"Right!" George agreed, jabbing Goyle with his wand. "You heard that? Stupid git..."

"As for Angelina..." Harry's voice grew more threatening and he stepped forward as Draco stepped back. "You touch her again...I'll do more than just bruise your face."

"He's not alone in that," George said menacingly.

After a beat in which these statements settled over them, Harry released Malfoy from the ropes. For a moment the boy looked like he was going to try and tackle Harry right there in the dusty corridor. Poor Dobby's wide eyes shown with nervous fright as he looked from face to face, but Malfoy merely smoothed his hair, his mouth shut tight, and reached out for the vial. Harry handed it to him.

Draco uncapped the potion and sniffed at it, his eyes flickering at Harry with disdain before he turned it over and saturated a cotton ball with the clear liquid. After a moment's hesitation, Draco rubbed the stuff across his bruised cheek. Seconds later the black bruise began to drain purple, thin bright pink, and finally died out to a slightly flushed fleshy color. Draco did this to the rest of the black surface and the same thing occurred. The side of his face where the bruise had been was now a little off-color, meaning that it was what normal skin

should look like, not Draco's usually pasty tone. But, then gradually that bit of color faded, too.

He thrust the vial and cotton balls back at Harry, who took them and stuffed them in his pocket amongst the now cooled chocolate chip biscuits the elves had given him.

"My voice, Potter," he mouthed.

Harry aimed his wand and Draco's throat and uttered: "Recipro Vox."

Draco coughed, clearing his throat loudly and wasting no time before he rasped: "If you ever--!"

"Pipe down, Malfoy!" George interrupted. "Unless you wanna get covered in boils."

Malfoy glared at George but did not attempt to yell again. He instead scoffed at the twin and turned his smirking gaze back to Harry. "You've got friends, do you Potter? You mean this sorry lot? The Weasels and your ugly little Mudblood friend Granger?"

"Watch your mouth, Malfoy or I'll silence you again."

"Right, you listen to me." Malfoy stepped up to him but Harry did not step back. "You can make all the threats you like, and you may have that stupid playbook back. I don't care about any of that any more. I do hate you, Potter. Much more than you think you know...school? School means nothing. I'm talking about the real world, Potter."

"Oh yeah?" Harry breathed, meeting Draco's gaze.

"That's right. My father has friends, too. And those friends are powerful. I'm going to join them, soon. You know what I'm talking about. You want to kill me because I got a feel on your little girlfriend?"

Harry's wand hand jerked up and the tip threatened to skewer Draco's chin. "Keep talking," he gritted.

Draco did keep talking, though he was clearly shaken by the presence of Harry's wand at his throat. "I don't need to get you expelled, Potter. You can have your girlfriend. I'll see you on the other side. We'll find out who's really got the guts to kill."

"I'll be waiting..." Harry almost whispered. He stared Malfoy down for a moment, feeling raw hatred coursing through him, before turning sharply and startling poor Dobby so that he jumped and squeaked as he commanded tersely: "Dobby get them back to the dungeons."

"Y-Yes Harry Potter, sir!"

"Get the hell out of here, Malfoy."

"Give me back my wand, Potter. And theirs, too Weasel."

"Call me that again..." George growled.

Harry reached into his pocket and drew out Malfoy's wand. He tossed it on the dusty floor. Draco sneered at him and bent to pick it up, wincing as he nearly lost his balance on his injured shin. George did the same with Crabbe and Goyle's wands. They could easily have resumed their duel in this dark corridor, but both parties backed away from each other, Dobby glancing back at Harry apprehensively as he lead the way back where they'd come.

When they had finally disappeared into the dusty darkness and Malfoy had turned around, Harry stared after them feeling quite clearly as if his life had just been threatened. This only served to fuel the anger and hatred he felt for Draco Malfoy. He was not afraid. He was ready. If Malfoy thought he and his father would get him, they had another thing coming.

Harry knew with certainty that his feud with the young Malfoy had been elevated, just then, to a level beyond the halls of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. And this had been revealed, as Malfoy had said earlier, because of a girl.

Angelina.

Harry stepped through the portrait hole with George, his eyes searching her out. She was there, still looking nervous and on edge. She didn't move to embrace him this time, but stood watching him walk wearily into the common room. He came to a stop across from her, their gazes locked. He felt...he felt so very glad to see her, and all the anger he had against her melted.

Everyone stared at him. Hermione looked like she was going to burst if she didn't say something to him soon, but she waited. Harry breathed, feeling very tired and hurting all over. He held out Angelina's playbook, still not taking his eyes off of hers.

"George found this."

She slowly looked down at it, her mouth coming open slightly.
"Where?"

"In Malfoy's locker in the Slytherin changing room."

"Oh, Harry...George...thank you!"

Harry gave her a weak smile and sank to the floor, causing everyone to gasp and rush to his aide. He merely brushed them away, sitting on his bum on the hearth rug, the warmth from the embers in the fireplace soothing the chill that was upon him. Everyone sat around him, some on the couch, some on the floor next to him. Angelina put the playbook down and sat directly across from him.

"I'm glad you made it back safely..."

"Me, too."

"I'm sorry I tried to-to stop you." She said quietly, and with some difficulty, he noticed.

"I'm not..." Hermione muttered.

Harry felt his broken bone burn again and looked up at her. "Hermione...do you think you could stop being mad at me long enough to...heal this?"

Hermione's cross expression melted quickly and she grabbed her wand. "Oh, your arm, you poor thing! Malfoy's a vicious little slug!"

"I got him back for it..." Harry panted softly, now watching Angelina watch him. The colors from the lingering fireworks outside lit up her face very nicely. He wanted to reach out and touch her skin, but Hermione was upon him. "Please be gentle, will you?"

Hermione gingerly helped him remove his jumper. Angelina helped him out of his shirt. He bit his lip at the pain as Hermione sat thinking. "Well...erm...I think I know how to do it properly, but it's risky Harry. Are you sure you don't want to just go to the hospital wing?"

He shook his head. "Just don't make my bones disappear."

She gave a wary sigh and aimed her wand at the tender flesh of his upper arm. "Emendo Ossis." It sounded to Harry like she was guessing, and he braced himself for the sludgy feeling of his bones evaporating and the flesh around them sinking in on itself. But his arm only burned warmly for a second and then he felt the pain ease off. He looked down and saw that the bruised skin around the wound was clearing up as well.

"Thanks..." He tried to flex it, but it was still tender.

"You'd better not move it too much," Hermione said, sounding extremely relieved. "I don't think I'm very strong in the Healing Spell department. That bone might still need time to mend by itself. Here..." She got up quickly and ran up the stairs to her room. When she returned, she was carrying a pair of black school socks. "Diffindo." Hermione tore open the seam in the foot of one of the socks and held it out to him once she'd cut open a smaller hole for his thumb. "These things are really tight, it'll keep your arm stable until it heals properly."

"Um..." he made a face at the sock.

"Well, it's clean! And it's the best we can do without going to Pomfrey..." She slipped it on, where it went up to his shoulder almost. He let her shrink it a little to make it tighter and then she sat back on her haunches and beamed at him. "There. That's better isn't it?"

He awarded her a grim smile. "Yeah..." Hermione set to work after that healing his cut cheek and fixing George's freckles. Harry's nose wasn't broken, by some miracle, and all that was left to do when she finished was wipe away the remainder of the blood. Harry got to his feet before she could fuss over him any more and sighed pointedly. "Listen, cheers for all that, but I'm really knackered."

"Aren't you guys gonna tell us what happened out there?" Ron demanded.

"I'm still awake," Fred answered him.

"Yeah, me too..." George agreed.

Harry gestured to them, shaking his head at Ron. "There. They'll tell you everything. I've got to go to sleep before I drop."

"Harry." He turned and saw Angelina coming towards him. "Can I...?"

He nodded silently and she escorted him up to his room.

Dean, Neville, and Seamus were all asleep in Neville's bed, having watched the teachers try to get rid of all the fireworks to the point of dozing off. Harry caught a glimpse of the clock on the wall and saw that he had been down in the common room with them till almost two in the morning. Angelina disappeared for a bit as Harry sat down on his own bed, leaning over and closing his eyes. His arm, clad in the tight black stocking Hermione had given him, rested gently on his knee. He was going over and over Malfoy's words to him in his head. He was certain that boy expected to become a Death Eater like his father.

Angelina came back with a towel that she'd soaked in hot water. She pulled his trunk up to the edge of the bed where he was and sat on it,

lifting his chin to her level. He sat silently and let her begin wiping the dried blood away.

Angelina shook her head, shuddering as she looked into his green eyes. He didn't speak; only let her gently wipe the blood from his chin and lips. She felt heavy in her chest and stomach. She had been so afraid for him, but now he was back from his duel...safe and not expelled or beaten with a whip.

"Did you think about things?" he spoke just as she passed the warm towel over his upper lip.

"Yes..." Angelina moved up to wipe under his nose, pretending to concentrate on the job. He reached up and took hold of her wrist, staying her hand. He was gazing at her intensely; almost imploringly. She sighed and lowered the towel. "I'm just glad you're okay, and...and I know why you did this for me."

"You do?"

She nodded. "Mmm..."

Harry leaned forward and kissed her, his lips still damp and warm from the towel. He reached around with his good arm and pulled her closer to him off the trunk. She dropped the towel and landed softly on top of him, taking care not to put pressure on his wounded one. He held her tight, and they kissed tenderly for a long time. Someone snorted loudly from Neville's bed and they stopped, looking into each other's eyes and smiling softly.

When they sat up again Angelina pushed the trunk away and retrieved the towel so she could finish cleaning his face. She got under his nose and eye, and he sat patiently letting her do it. Once she was done she Vanished the towel and took his face in both hands, pulling him over to her and kissing him deeply.

He pulled back; breathing slowly; his eyes burning into hers. "Are we still...together?" His voice was almost timid.

"Yes!" Angelina whispered.

"I know I scared you before. I won't act like that again, I promise."

"Harry..." Angelina frowned and turned to fully face him. "That wasn't you."

Harry paused, his eyes narrowing past her, into the dark. It seemed for a moment that he would remain staring at Seamus' bed, but then he sighed and nodded. "It was and it wasn't. Voldemort--" Angelina shuddered again. "Uh...You-Know-Who...was really angry about something, and...well I could feel it. He was making me say those things."

Angelina touched her fingers to her mouth. "That's awful..."

"It hasn't happened again," he offered lamely.

"But it's happened before?"

He hesitated. "Yes..."

"Harry you've got to tell someone. Dumbledore..."

"I have told him. He said he needed to think it over. He was being vague...but he said I had a really strong connection to Vol--You-Know-Who. He said I should keep my friends close and you even closer..." Harry was looking at her beseechingly again.

"He knows about us?" He nodded. "And he said that? That you should keep me closer?"

"Yes..."

Angelina smiled warmly at him. "Then you should take his advice."

Harry returned her smile. They got undressed and got into bed. He held her close, his arm throbbing faintly but not nearly as painful as before Hermione fixed it. Harry was fast asleep when Ron came up, yawning.

"Fred and George told us everything," he muttered to Angelina, who had been watching Harry thoughtfully. "I wish I'd been down there. Harry's arm wouldn't have been broken. I'd have made sure of that..."

He dozed off still muttering about what he would've done to Malfoy if he hadn't been left behind. Angelina sighed and watched Harry sleep some more. She was very glad that he hadn't been caught, that she had her playbook back, and that he was not angry with her anymore. His bare chest rose and fell, and he looked so innocent then. But Harry was a fighter, she could see that. Innocence was evaporating from him very quickly, if it hadn't already been all but gone as a result of the things that'd happened to him in the first place. Angelina knew, as she watched him breathe, that she was falling for him...she was falling...I think I'm falling in love with you...she thought. She would keep that to herself for now, but the notion filled her with a renewed sense of belonging. She belonged right here lying next to him, she was sure of it.

Leaning over to kiss him gently on the mouth, she disturbed him and he rolled over, draping his arm around her and pulling her close. He slept so heavily, and soon so did she.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Let's Talk About

"Great..." Ron muttered, kicking at the snow as he, Hermione, and Harry trudged up the path away from the pitch after the Slytherin/Ravenclaw match. "We've got to play Slytherin for the Cup."

"So?" Harry responded, wiping his nose. "We can beat them."

He felt sorry for Cho; her team had played a decent game, but in the end she got viciously side-swiped by Malfoy and lost her advantage for the Snitch. He realized that he had said "we" as in "me and the rest of the team" but neither Hermione nor Ron noticed as they stomped the snow from the bottoms of their boots before entering the castle.

As they elbowed their way through crowds of Ravenclaws and Slytherins, most still twirling their noise-makers and whooping and yelling with lingering excitement from the match, they passed a few third-years sneakily scribbling EAT POOP over the words to Umbridge's latest decree with bright red ink. He smiled to himself as they made it to the marble staircase and began their ascent.

Umbridge had become a monster after the incident with the fireworks. She had posted up two more decrees, one right after the other. The first one had been, as McGonagall had predicted, a license for her to search any part of the school she wished for disciplinary or "emergency" reasons. She tore through Harry's dorm first, but did not find much. She didn't get her chubby hands on his Invisibility Cloak or his Marauder's Map because he had the good sense to keep them both with him in his bag that day, ready for her to spring the decree on them at any moment. Ron had been most upset—she smushed his entire year's supply of chocolate frogs in her crazed determination to find anything incriminating.

Harry at first had no idea how the twins managed to hide all of their stuff. He imagined they had loads of it what with all the merchandise they'd been selling, but Fred had explained that they'd always sell out everything in their stock and would have to make more. The fireworks he had set off that night was everything they had, so there was really nothing left to find except their book, which they kept with them at all

times to make notes on ideas. Of course, a number of students had wound up having to flush their Weasley's Wizard Wheazies items or Vanish them in their haste to avoid expulsion. A lot of upset students staged a small revolt against the twins, demanding their money back, but the boys assured them they'd get their money's worth soon enough. They were charming, those two.

Hagrid had met Delores Umbridge, all right. And as he told the trio when they'd gone to visit him for the first time after he'd gotten back: "She's a right nasty piece o'work!"

Umbridge had interrogated Hagrid as he was the only witness to the events of the night, and he had let slip, in true Hagrid fashion, that he thought he heard spells being thrown back and forth when he'd been walking in the forest.

" 'Why were you in the forest at that hour?' she asks me, and o'course I told her ter check on...some things...but she kept on with the questions. 'Where were the spells being thrown?' and I tried o'think of summit to tell'er but she kept askin' so I says 'the Quidditch pitch' and she didn't even let me say 'but I could've been mistaken...' she just turned and knocked open my bloody cabin door and marched herself right down to the pitch!"

According to Hagrid, Umbridge had inspected the entire pitch with help from Filch and Snape, including the locker rooms, and probably deduced that they had indeed been fighting there. She wasn't stupid—Harry was sure she also figured out that the fireworks were a distraction. Another decree went up in a flash and Hagrid was placed on probation.

"I hadn't even been back for an hour! She just shouted 'you're on probation, sir, for allowing those hooligans to escape!' " They could not suppress a laugh at Hagrid's high-pitched impression of Umbridge's snotty voice.

The decree stated plainly that any students caught dueling would not only be expelled, but permanently banned from setting foot on Hogwarts grounds ever again.

That was all expected, though. Granted, having Hagrid being put on probation was a nasty backlash—and they all three did their best to urge Hagrid not to do anything to step on Umbridge's toes. He had told them about his journey to the mountains with Olympe Maxime to curry favor with the giants. They were on pins and needles during most of their Care of Magical Creatures classes after that, but actually in Harry's opinion they hadn't gone that badly. They learned about Thestrals, the invisible beasts that pulled the Hogwarts carriages. Only Harry, Neville, Luna, and a few others could see them, of course. Aside from having to put up with Umbridge's every effort to make Hagrid out to be a big dumb brute, Harry rather enjoyed learning about them.

It was now a week until Christmas break.

Underneath his Christmas cheer, Harry was feeling a little sad. This had to do with two things, one being that Sirius would spend Christmas alone. Ron had invited him to join his family at the Burrow for the holidays, and Harry had excitedly accepted, but in his heart of hearts he knew that Mrs. Weasley would be uncomfortable having his godfather in her house and that meant poor Sirius would be left to pull a lonely cracker with Kreacher at Grimmauld Place. He wanted very much to write Sirius a letter explaining things, but Umbridge had her hands in everything, and he decided against that risky course of action. He supposed he could persuade Mrs. Weasley to take him to go and visit Sirius on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, just so his godfather wouldn't feel so cut off from everybody.

"I'm sure Lupin will be there," Hermione offered him. She was going skiing with her parents. "He won't be totally alone."

Harry told himself that there was no shame in wanting to be warm and comfortable and surrounded by the cheerful Weasley family rather than in the dark, dusty confines of the Black house. But he did swear silently that he would make every effort to visit Sirius and spend the whole day with him, and even get him something when they went shopping in Diagon Alley.

The other thing that took Harry a little off his holiday cheer: he was dreading being away from Angelina for the whole break. She would

be with her parents in Cannes for Christmas. She had been practicing her French for the last few weeks as the snow fell, and it was nice because it distracted her from nagging him about details of the duel.

Harry decided early on to come up with ways to savor their time together before everyone would be leaving for Christmas. He didn't rightly know what had caused it, but suddenly he found himself feeling...all fussed up; restless; lustful, even. More and more as the days progressed and he knew that soon they'd spend the whole break apart his thoughts were aimed at one thing when he was around her. He watched her a lot, more than he had before...her eyes...her mouth...her body's curves and slopes and glowing brown skin...she posed for him willingly under his intense gaze sometimes, though discretely so that no one caught on.

Harry was experiencing some kind of fiery rise in boldness from dueling with Malfoy. This, coupled with the invigoration he felt in knowing that despite Umbridge's best efforts she had not managed yet to do away with him, at least for the time being, served as kindling for the smoldering libido within him through the cold December days. Indeed it seemed a million miles away all of a sudden, that time when he could no sooner talk to a girl than kiss her.

Where before he might feel embarrassed for ogling her so much, recently Harry simply could not help undressing her with his eyes any chance he got, and it helped that Angelina no longer felt unsure about the future of their relationship. She did away with whatever ultimatum she'd given him in the Room of Requirement; she no longer needed to 'think about things'. They were on the same page again--had they ever really broken up? It just didn't seem like it now; they had become so close. Harry had been hesitant and nervous sexually before all of that Malfoy nonsense, but fighting for her—punching and kicking and firing spells from his wand and running and almost getting caught—it made him feel...it was inexplicable. That unexpected show of vulnerability in his bed that time had been forced down and locked away—Harry wanted no more of it. Of course, he was still inexperienced, but where he only hesitated before, now he dove into whatever new exploration they touched on while alone together. It was exciting; a quiet storm was brewing inside him—inside them both. Harry had not been touched so intimately and so much ever before,

and when he got over his initial desire to pull away from the foreign invasion of his body's personal space, he found it very easy to allow himself to be comfortable with it, and enjoy it. They did things...things that Harry had only vaguely thought about when he was alone and girlfriendless in the past, or not at all.

Things like making out for hours on end during their free periods, touching each other in ways they hadn't before, and giving each other 'injuries of passion', as Dumbledore put it, in places other than their necks. Harry began to claim his favorite parts of her, and visa versa. He really liked her bum...it was kind of funny to her but something about squeezing that soft mound of flesh excited him a great deal. They played games—one in particular was simultaneously the most exciting yet the most frustrating. It was kind of unspoken and they took turns unconsciously. Harry started it right after the duel, still feeling the edge from all the hostility he held for Malfoy one evening when they were fooling around. It wasn't that he didn't want her to see...or touch...but he kind of enjoyed refusing her—he grew to take pleasure in the cranberry flush of her chocolate skin that sprouted up when she was frustrated with desire. After a few times she began to refuse him, and he caught on that she enjoyed doing so as much as he did. It drove him into a state of barely contained, borderline-lentiousness, but that was the idea.

That first time, though, he didn't understand what he was doing or what he wanted until he saw her reaction to him when he broke off their deep, sensual kisses and muttered: "Wait..."

Angelina's eyes flickered at him from beneath her heavy lids and she shook her head slowly. "What's wrong?" She was gripping his sweater with both hands, her slender fingers digging into his chest. He was on top of her on a bed of cushions in the Room of Requirement. A meeting had ended less than twenty minutes earlier and they had both stayed behind to 'tidy up', falling into each other's arms as soon as the last pair of feet shuffled through the door. Harry was nursing an erection that strained and pushed against the opening of his school slacks, rubbing against the bare silky skin of her thigh. He had no reason to stop her; he wanted to keep going very badly, but he whispered 'wait' anyhow.

Harry breathed on her, and she bit her lip, squirming slightly from the feel of the stiff phallic shape pressing against her. "Slow down..."

Angelina nodded, understanding, and he leaned in to kiss her again. She claimed his mouth with hers heatedly, a whimper of desire suppressed by his tongue as he slid it inside. He reached under her short school skirt and squeezed her bottom; his favorite place; as she opened her legs wider and the heat from between them caressed his member through his pants. Harry lost himself in the motions—opening his mouth and sucking on her chin and neck and earlobe (she taught him that one), and moving gradually down to the bit of chest exposed by the opening in her shirt. When she let go of his sweater with one hand and reached down in the tight space between them to stroke her fingers lightly against his throbbing member, he exhaled and pulled back again.

"Hm-mm..." he shook his head at her, reaching down and pulling her fingers away. He was in agony—he wanted her to touch him so...god so badly...but he pulled her hand away despite his cock screaming for it to stay. "Don't."

"...too fast?" she breathed; her eyes were patient and considerate but her voice was coated in frustration of a certain kind. It made Harry's heart thump painfully. That blood pumped down into his groin something fierce as he replaced her roaming hand on his chest and gave her a fleeting peck on the mouth, not answering her question right away. "Harry, don't tease me..." she said, her voice deepening sexily, and it drove a spike of quivering excitement all through him when he heard that tone while simultaneously realizing that this was in fact what he was doing. He was teasing her, and he liked it.

In the present; as he lagged behind Hermione and Ron while they tried to trick each other into telling what they planned to buy the other for Christmas on their way up to their floor; Harry smiled lazily to himself at the memory of it. When things got hot and heavy like that, one of them usually put an end to it before they reached the point of no return. That night it had been him. Sex...actual intercourse...he didn't think he was ready. He loved being intimate with Angelina, but...he didn't know. The time hadn't come yet, was all he could think to tell himself. They both seemed content with the way things were for

the time being anyway, so he saw no reason to change it...yet. Heavy petting was pretty damned nice in its own right.

Besides that bit of naughtiness, however, there was a very deep affection developing between them. Harry had decided to trust her with himself; trust that she liked him—hell, maybe even cared for him. Hermione had made an interesting point one day in the library when Harry was comparing she and Ron with he and Angelina, who were getting closer every day.

“Well, Ron and I have just gotten started, but then again we haven’t been through what you and Angelina did, have we?” She sucked on her quill thoughtfully.

“What d’you mean?” he had asked her, poking his head above his History of Magic textbook.

“Just that you and Angelina went through something pretty major at the start of your relationship. You’re just kids, aren’t you? Granted, she is older than you, but it doesn’t look as if that matters much to either of you...”

“Well I’m very aware of it, if that’s what you mean,” he explained. “But, no I guess it doesn’t bother me that much.”

“I think—this is just me taking a guess purely as an outside observer, mind you—but I think that when you went off with your fists raised at Malfoy for what he’d done, it made Angelina realize that you’re not just some stupid kid who only wanted to brag to his friends that he dated an older girl.”

Harry had made a face at her then, thinking that she was way off. “How d’you figure that? I think she fancied my reaction was rather immature.”

“Perhaps at first—I know I did at first—but, no. Once she had time to think about it, I’ll bet she realized that you really care about her Harry. Maybe neither of you realize why exactly, yet, though.”

“Why...?”

Hermione hesitated, and seemed to struggle with herself a bit. He could only have guessed that what she told him next would be something she believed was true, but that he perhaps would not warm up to right away, if at all. "Well, Harry..." she sighed. "Please don't take this the wrong way, but Angelina is only your first girlfriend. And you've rather...I don't know...latched onto her pretty deeply."

"What in bloody hell do you mean I've latched on--?"

She could see him becoming agitated and shushed him apologetically, but continued to express her opinion.

"I mean think about it, Harry! You've been—well, sorry, but you've been abused your whole life! Down right abused! Both physically and mentally! You've had no love or affection from those people who've raised you for fifteen years, and even though you know Ron and I care for you, it's just not enough..."

He could only stare at her, her words making his skin feel all prickly as if his whole body was a limb that had fallen asleep.

"I can only imagine what it must be for you to have someone like Angelina—an older girl you probably never dreamed would think of you in such a way in a million years—suddenly paying you the kind of attention you've always longed for...well having Malfoy threaten that nearly drove you over the edge, didn't it? You fought for what you felt rightfully belonged to you after so long of going without it. And you did fight, Harry, tooth and nail, and you won and now you are plunging in. Probably expecting it to slip away from you any...moment..."

When she had finished, her voice sort of died out as if the last of her resolve waned when she got a look at his face. She looked afraid he would yell at her.

He merely made a small noise that sounded like "Okay..." and sat staring at his textbook for several minutes, taking it all in.

"Harry...?" she'd whispered timidly after a while. He looked up at her. "Are you mad I said all that?"

He shook his head. "No..." After a beat he added: "You're not that far off, actually..."

She raised her eyebrows, surprised to hear that. "Oh..." They continued studying in silence.

Harry didn't think about it too much. In fact, it was kind of hard to rap his brain around, especially with it being overrun with thoughts of how badly he wanted to see Angelina naked. He never brought this up, of course. It was just something that was there, hovering like the giant fireworks display of Umbridge over the grounds of his subconscious. It had only been a few weeks. But, yes Hermione may have been partially right. Intimacy, Harry found, was his new favorite thing. Better than flying. Better than knowing that Malfoy was seething with jealousy somewhere as he watched Harry kiss Angelina and hold her hand.

Hands.

Angelina had claimed her favorite part of him to be his hands.

"You have very nice hands, Harry..." she had told him only the night before. They were in the common room on the couch, warming themselves by the fire. It was very late; past two in the morning, and it was just the two of them. She had been feeling sick all day and Harry hadn't seen her much until that evening. They had been struggling to fall asleep, but every time one of them managed to dose the other would move and then their hands roamed wantonly.

Angelina had taken hold of his hand and began examining it. It was the one with the scar from Umbridge's enchanted quill, and she ran her silky touch over the words carved into his skin.

"That looks pretty ugly to me," he replied darkly.

"The scar gives it character in my opinion but that's not what I'm talking about."

"What are you talking about?" He watched her splay his fingers apart, turning his hand around in hers, measuring them against each other.

"The way you hold your wand...the way you roll up your sleeves or run your fingers through your hair...it's very sexy."

"I'm not the only guy who holds a wand or rolls up his sleeves." He still had not managed to get used to her complimenting him, especially on his physical attributes. If he had a choice he would have had her speak to him about his lips since he used them so much...

"Hmmm, they're strong but with delicate slender fingers. You just don't understand. A girl likes a nice pair of hands on a boy."

Harry did not understand at all at first. He thought she was being rather odd about it. He had never once heard Ginny or Hermione or any other girl he listened to speak of how cute a boy's hands were. He often heard of hair (his was hopeless) or eyes (not bad in that department, he admitted) or body shape (he really wanted to be taller...), or some other obvious thing, but not...hands? He decided to stop thinking about it and kissed her softly.

They were still in their school things, so the warmth of the fire was insulated in the thick fabric of his jumper and her crisp white shirt. She loosened his tie with one hand, the other still holding his scarred hand. He sank his tongue deep into her mouth and pulled her closer to him; their legs entwined. She made noises in his ear—deep, throaty noises that he could not get enough of. He reached up with the hand she held and clasped her breast, applying gentle pressure so that she made another noise. He grinned against her neck, flicking his tongue out quickly and wetting the skin there.

"Harry?" Angelina breathed, still holding the hand that was on her breast.

"Yes..." came his hoarse reply as he concentrated on teasing the hard nipple poking through the fabric of her shirt with his thumb. He had discovered that making slow, deliberate circles drove her to breathless excitement. She tightened her grip on his hand as he did this.

"You're not afraid of me, are you?"

He shook his head slowly, feeling his throat tighten. "No..." He glanced up to discover that she had the same look in her eyes as when she had revealed her breasts to him that one time. He figured she would do the same now, and he was all for it. But she bit her lip and swallowed; the glint in her eyes much different from that occasion's naughty mischief—it was outright fiery desire tonight. As on other, now increasingly frequent occasions, little Harry woke up and began to drain all the blood from big Harry's pumping heart to aid its rise to attention.

"You trust me?" Angelina kissed him tenderly.

"Yes..." Another kiss. His hand was being guided away from her breast and he felt a little disappointed.

"Don't be afraid."

"I'm not." Still lower. She held it at the spot where her navel hid under the top rim of her skirt.

"Hold me closer." Harry obeyed, circling his free arm around her and pulling her close. She breathed on him. The fire crackled at his back. His cock throbbed painfully...hotly...he stared at her lips. He could feel her rubbing against him down there. His hand was guided still lower. What was it about hands....? And...fingers...?

She had slipped his hand under her skirt. Harry immediately looked into her eyes, which were positively burning. The firelight flickered in them. Her thighs trembled slightly. It was very...very...warm down there between her legs. His fingertips grazed the soft cotton of her underwear. She was wet. His other hand gripped her at the slope of her lower back, and he exhaled.

"Just relax. Okay?"

"Okay," he almost whispered.

She kissed him again, and at the same time that her tongue slid into his mouth, she slid two of his fingers inside...Merlin. They were

submerged into a hot, throbbing cocoon that was slick with her fluids and she moaned for him as she guided him slowly. At her urging, his fingers slid in and out of the warm, damp wonderland while his thumb was pressed against the swollen bulb just above it. She instructed him with her own thumb on top of his to replicate the deliberate circles he'd administered to her nipple earlier. He did as she instructed, sliding in and out while stimulating her clit dutifully. Angelina moaned again and quivered, the muscles in her abdomen contracting with pleasure.

Harry was beside himself with the thrill of it all as he moved his fingers just as she wanted him to. He did not miss a beat--quickenning the pace when she wanted, slowing down when she wanted, and feeling his own arousal reaching a painful zenith that filled his head with a thick, lustful cloud. Angelina's other arm was around his back; she dug her nails into his shirt and moaned louder. Harry felt very powerful, very bold, very much older than fifteen. He felt himself becoming at ease with the rhythm and soon did not need her to guide him. She kissed him and squeezed him close and moaned and pumped and writhed against him. His fingers slipped in and out of her and teased and massaged her clit with more and more confidence the more noise she made.

"H-harder, Harry..." she whimpered. He was momentarily taken out of his concentration when she spoke, but there was no time to hesitate now; she had her eyes shut tight and her thighs were closing around his forearm. He licked his lips and held her tight, moving with an added little push of force, though careful he wouldn't hurt her. So this is what she'd been on about when she was saying how nice my hands were!

Her gasps grew more strained; her thighs squeezing tighter and tighter...she clawed at him and shook her head like a wild thing caught in a trap and Harry's mouth hung open as he watched her. He did not want to change a stroke or deviate from his rhythm in any way, lest he impede this fascinating behavior.

Very suddenly she moaned loudly and her thighs squeezed the circulation out of his arm and then his whole hand was wet. Gradually all of her holds on him loosened. Her thighs let up on his aching arm

and her nails released their clutching of his back. Harry slid his hand from under her skirt and before he could examine it properly she had pulled his wand out of his pocket and Scourgified the slightly glistening substance away.

Today the memory of that had crept up on him several times, and he would look down at his hands and feel very oddly pleased with himself. He could only think to himself that if she ever wanted him to do that again, he would gladly oblige her.

They reached the common room, where Angelina had stayed behind from the game, saying she wanted to study some more French for her trip. But he knew that she had other things in mind, as he'd caught her doing it several times over the last few weeks since he had brought the thing back to her. Now, sure enough, she was reading through it intently again when they emerged.

"How was the match?" she asked, not looking up from the playbook.

"Fine. You feel better?"

"Got something for my cough from Pomfrey a little while ago. It seems fine, now. Fever's gone, too..."

"Angelina, why are you looking at that again?" Harry asked in exasperation as he bounced down next to her on the couch, removing his gloves. She frowned and turned a page.

"It's funny, Harry. I mean...can you imagine how embarrassed that git Malfoy is feeling right now, knowing we've all seen that stuff?" Ron asked, smiling as he shrugged out of his coat and helped Hermione out of hers.

"I can..." Harry answered, still eyeing Angelina. "But I don't fancy looking at that stuff again. It just makes me mad."

"I know it does," she spoke, turning another page. "But actually I was looking at what they did to my plays. Montague isn't as stupid as he looks, it seems...look at this." She handed him the book. He took it and skimmed over some notes the captain had made, shaking his head dismissively and handing it back to her.

"You've come up with much better."

"They won the match, didn't they?"

He rolled his eyes and shrugged out of his coat rather than answer her. She went back to reading, so he turned away and looked over at Ron, who was now draping an arm around Hermione. She snuggled into him on the oversized armchair they were occupying. Harry smiled wryly at them both and Ron blushed a little. "Shut up Harry..."

"What?"

"Just don't say it, all right?" Angelina looked up from the book again, smiling in the same fashion Harry was. Ron groaned.

"Say what?" Harry persisted with false indifference before adopting a high-pitched, nasal girl-voice that was not unlike Pansy Parkinson's. "That you two are sooo cute together?" He narrowly avoided being struck in the face by a flying velvet cushion. Laughing, Harry sighed and put his arm around Angelina. Where he had been filled with anger at both Malfoy and Angelina before, now he found himself cheerful and self-satisfied; almost jubilant, really.

Ron had put his foot down, so to speak, to Hermione about Viktor Krum and a few other things. They had been sitting in the common room one night not too long ago; the girls were studying of course but Ron and Harry were playing wizard chess. They had been discussing (puzzling over, really) Hagrid's appearance, which seemed to get worse every day.

"His face looks like a troll used it for target practice..." Ron was saying, wincing as he watched his pawn get pummeled by Harry's knight. He was about to sweep away the remains of his doomed chess piece when he looked up and noticed Hermione wasn't reading her Ancient Runes textbook anymore. "What's that? A letter?" he raised himself up on his elbows. Harry used the opportunity to move his piece in for the kill on another of the white pawns.

"Don't cheat, Harry..." Ginny said sternly from behind him. He rolled his eyes and prodded the knight back.

Ron wasn't paying attention however. Hermione was reading something very quickly, mouthing the words and shaking her head sadly.

"Hey. Hey, Hermione what are you reading over there?"

She jumped a bit at his raised voice and frowned at him. "What? Ron, your pawn is being threatened again."

Ron sat up on his haunches and stared at her. "It's another letter from Krum, isn't it?"

Hermione's cheeks went pink. "As if that's any of your business..."

He fixed her with a forbidding gaze that Harry had rarely seen him use. The game now forgotten, Harry exchanged knowing and anticipatory glances with Angelina and Ginny and sat up too. Hermione seemed to be reading and writing at the same time; her quill was poised over a piece of parchment. Harry knew she was answering the letter tonight, and he hoped that it said what they had discussed.

"Listen..." Ron started, his voice cracking a bit as he licked his lips. "I'm...I have to say...this Krum thing has gone on long enough, hasn't it?"

Hermione and everyone else gaped at him. He looked very anxious, but determined. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"It means you can't possibly think you can carry on a relationship with this guy through bloody letters and cards, Hermione. He lives half a world away and he's...he's an oaf!"

"Ha! Is he?" she said scathingly, setting down Viktor's letter and turning in her chair to glare at him. "And what are you? You act all jealous and you yell your head off but you never actually have anything meaningful to say, do you Ron?"

"Right." Ron stood up and marched over to her, stepping over Harry. She squealed as he seized the quill from her and snatched a clean piece of parchment over to the other side of the table, where he shooed Ginny away onto the couch and sat down. " 'Oi, Viktor Krum!' " he gritted his teeth as he wrote, dipping the quill in her ink bottle. " 'Hermione Granger is no longer interested in you, got it? She's already got a boyfriend, and his name is Ron Weasley, so get that through your thick Bulgarian head!'"

"Ron..." Harry said, trying to suppress a laugh. "Don't you think maybe you should...ask her...first...if..." Ron had fixed him with a dirty look and he trailed off. Hermione was looking at the redhead in shock. She did not seem to mind that he had declared himself her boyfriend. In fact, Harry fancied he saw her eyes glimmer with admiration.

" 'And stop sending her bloody letters, because she won't be reading them anymore and it's bloody annoying! She'll be busy with her boyfriend, Ron Weasley. That's R-O-N, W-E-A-S--!'"

"All right, Ron, you've made your point!" Hermione cried, alarmed but happy. She stopped his hand from its furious scribbling and gently took away the parchment. Of course, she had no intention of letting him send that letter, but the fact that he had willingly said all this in front of everyone, and actually finally said in his own special way how he felt made her extremely pleased.

Everyone watched as he grumbled something about "who's the oaf, now?" and she got up and walked around the table and leaned down to give him a soft, tender peck on the cheek.

"I really like you, too..." she whispered. Ginny let out a happy giggle that broke the silence and Ron buried his face in his arms on the table, suddenly very aware of his behavior.

They had been kind of inseparable ever since. Though they held hands and stayed close like they were on the armchair, now, Harry wondered if they had actually officially kissed yet.

He looked back over at his own girlfriend and groaned loudly. "Put that away, will you?" He snatched the playbook from her and tossed it on the couch next to him. She made a face at him but did not protest. "I'm starting to regret giving you that back. You've got your nose in it all the time."

"I thought you understood; I was trying to find out more about...you know."

Harry understood perfectly, but it did not make him any more receptive to the idea. Apparently so did Hermione, despite Angelina's efforts to mask her statement with a blank expression. "I don't think Malfoy would be stupid enough to put anything in there about that, Angelina..." the girl said somewhat hesitantly.

Harry sighed and quickly changed the subject. "Dean said something about trying to get a party going tonight?"

Ron's face lit up and he shifted in the armchair, leaning forward so that Hermione was forced to let him take away his arm. "Sawr'im and Seamus posting that flyer before we went down to breakfast. It's brilliant, look."

He pointed over to the bulletin board that hung in the common room between the two sets of stairs leading up to the boys' and girls' dorms. There was a flyer posted in the center, covering the litter of decrees that had accumulated there over the months. Dean and Seamus had bewitched it so that it flashed bright red and green. Harry turned and squinted as he read aloud the crudely written announcement that there was to be a pre-holiday Christmas party in Gryffindor Tower after dinner that would last till dawn.

DUSK TILL DAWN SHINDIG IN GRYFFINDOR TOWER TONIGHT!

Wear festive knickers!

PUMPKIN JUICE, BUTTER BEER, MUSIC, DANCING!

Mistletoe everywhere!

(IN HONOR OF OUR DEAR HIGH INQUISITOR DELORES 'EATS POOP' UMBRIDGE)

Special HOSTS Fred and George Weasley!

"Great!" Harry beamed, turning around and giving Ron a high five across the arm of the couch. "So we should all expect to be chucked out come morning, then!"

"Hey, see you guys at the party?" some unfamiliar Gryffindor called to them as Harry and Ron were leaving dinner that evening, the girls strolling and talking amongst themselves behind them.

"Sure, um...we're just gonna catch up on some last minute...er...studying...in the library..." Ron answered uncertainly. Harry elbowed him hard in the ribs as the fourth year boy gave them puzzled looks. "I mean, right! See you there!"

"Brilliantly handled, Ron," Harry jested, shaking his head as they rounded a corner and left the fourth year and his friends behind. "Next time let me do the talking."

"Right, sorry..." Ron ran a hand through his ginger hair and gave Harry an apologetic shrug.

They were on their way up to the seventh floor for their last D.A. meeting before break, the four of them. Though they still took every precaution to avoid being discovered, they figured that simply walking together in the halls wasn't enough to make anyone suspicious. Ginny had separated from them when they left the Great Hall, as did the twins who explained that they needed to set up for the party. Everyone else would come later, as usual.

"So do you still fancy Malfoy's gonna become a Death Eater like his dear old dad?" Ron asked as they climbed a set of marble stairs.

Harry sighed. "Hermione thinks I'm being paranoid. She says he was only bluffing to scare me."

"It is his style, though, innit? And he was probably furious at you for getting back the playbook and all that..."

"Yeah, but I dunno...I have a feeling." Harry was quiet for a while, sifting through various thoughts about Malfoy, until his mind shifted to another thought pattern and he smiled to himself a little. He could hear Angelina and Hermione talking under their breath. Probably comparing Ron and me, he thought. He was a little worried that Angelina would divulge their recent goings on, but then he actually wanted to talk to Ron about them, so...he glanced at Ron sideways. The boy seemed lost in thought. "Hey, Ron? Can I ask you something?"

"Sure..." Ron shrugged again, staring down at his own moving feet.

Harry took a quick look back at the girls to make sure they were still engrossed in their own conversation before he continued. He had truthfully been wanting to have this conversation with his best friend for a while, now. He knew that they couldn't really go into all the details now, especially not with the girls behind them and the Room of Requirement only another floor up. But he still wanted to ask the question, just to make sure he wasn't totally alone in his anxiousness where this subject was concerned.

"Um...well...do you...?" He took another glance at the girls. They were laughing quietly about something, put not paying attention. "Do you ever think about...what it would be like...to-to have, um...well, you know."

Ron looked up from his shoes. "What it would be like to have what?" He frowned at Harry, probably already deducing what it was the bespectacled boy wanted to talk about.

Harry gestured at nothing in particular with his hands. "Um, you know." And he mouthed: "S-E-X?"

Ron's mouth dropped but he quickly recovered when Harry rolled his eyes and groaned pointedly under his breath. Now both boys glanced back at the girls, and Ron took hold of Harry's arm to get him to speed up a little as they ascended the next set of stairs. Harry thought in the back of his mind that he really should be checking his

Marauder's map, but he reasoned that Filch was probably still below them, seeing the last of the students out of the Great Hall.

"You mean...you've actually done it?"

"No!" Harry hissed a little too loudly. The girls remained oblivious. "No, I haven't but...well we've been fooling around...a lot...lately..." He hadn't imagined he would feel so uncomfortable talking about this with someone. And it was Ron, his closest friend! Still...the intense gaze the other boy was giving him made him uneasy. He kind of wished he hadn't brought it up. "Er...never mind."

"Harry if you lose your virginity before me I'll never forgive you."

"What?"

"What?" Ron seemed surprised at himself.

"What did you just--?"

"Nothing, never mind. Shut up." Ron blushed furiously and Harry noticed that they had arrived in front of the tapestry where three trolls were beating a wizard senseless.

"Okay, now close your eyes...breathe deeply..."

Harry stood next to Cho, speaking to her softly, as the others watched. They had been learning the stuff that Harry read about in his preparation for his duel with Malfoy. And of course the first thing out of Zach Smith's mouth was: "You're the reason Umbridge posted that decree banning dueling, aren't you?" Harry did not answer him, but he didn't really need to. He knew he should never underestimate the power of hearsay, and even though Umbridge hadn't caught them, the rumors about McGonagall refusing to let her search Gryffindor Tower and sightings of Malfoy limping a little on his injured shin served to put speculation in people's heads.

But Zach piped down after a couple of meetings in which Harry passed on some of the techniques he had learned. The boy seemed eager, like most of the others, to be getting on with what he called "the really exciting stuff." Harry didn't begrudge him his enthusiasm. It

was a nice change. In fact, where Zach had been the voice of dissent before, now Marietta Edgecombe had filled this position. She had been the only one who didn't fancy the idea of learning to duel. She said it scared her; it was too violent and she complained that he could end up leading them to hurt themselves.

"Marietta, I thought I made it clear before how important this kind of stuff is..." Harry had tried to explain patiently. "And I'd never intentionally hurt anybody."

Because she was Cho's friend, he didn't become as irritated with her as quickly as he had with Zach, but she was trying his patience. She sulked for most of his lessons, and only half-heartedly participated. Cho, to make up for this, operated with unabashed enthusiasm and paid extra attention when he was showing them things.

Now, she closed her eyes and did as she was told, taking slow deliberate breaths.

"Now I'm going to stop talking, but you just focus on your breathing. And the quiet. Steady your thoughts...and concentrate on your wand. Let it guide you..."

Cho seemed to be lulled by his soft way of speaking to her and she nodded slowly. Everyone waited. She stood there for a long time, very still and very quiet. Then she swayed a little and a second later shouted a hex that tore a giant hole in the cushion Zach was holding up several feet away directly across from her. Feathers flew out everywhere, but Cho's eyes opened and she beamed. Everyone gave her impressed applause.

"Good, Cho. What did you feel?"

"A funny tremble in here?" She gestured to her midsection, furrowing her brows at him quizzically. He made a face of approval and gave her a pat on the shoulder. "Is that right?"

"It's one of the places marked in the book I showed you guys. I think that means you're sensible and cautious, but very powerful. Great job."

“Thanks Harry!”

Harry shooed her off to go and sit down with the others as Zach repaired the cushion with his wand. Blowing his hair out of his face and rolling up his sleeves, Harry picked out the last person of the night with a bit of hesitancy. Marietta stood up and walked toward him, her expression conveying her attitude. He didn’t waste time trying to soften her up.

“Okay, Marietta, raise your wand.” She did as he said, though a bit too leisurely. Harry pressed on. “Close your eyes and focus on the quiet. Let yourself fall gradually into the quiet and stillness...”

“Your breath is tickling my cheek. I can’t concentrate.”

“Oh. Sorry. Right.” He stepped back. “Better?”

“I suppose...”

Trying to ignore his desire to roll his eyes, Harry continued. “So you’re supposed to be very still and letting the quiet wash over you.”

“But it’s not quiet. You’re talking.”

“I’m going to stop talking in a second.”

“But I won’t have been able to focus on anything but your voice by then.”

“You’ll have time to focus properly, don’t worry...”

She sighed rather impatiently. “Fine, go on...”

Harry glanced over at Cho, who was looking at him apologetically, but surged on. “Okay when I stop talking, let your wand guide you, and get a spell ready because you’ll feel your magic coming up pretty suddenly--”

"But if I'm supposed to be still and quiet and not thinking of anything, won't it distract me to have to come up with a charm to use?" She was whining now.

"I meant get it ready before I stop talking."

"Well, when do you stop? We've been at this for a while now. You don't think I understand how it works?"

"Well..."

"Why can't we just learn Patronus Charms instead?"

"I already told everybody, we're learning Patronus Charms after break!" he snapped, despite himself. Her eyes flew open and she rounded on him, her aimed wand swinging round with her. She brandished it at him, her mousy brown hair flinging in her face.

"Don't you yell at me!"

"I wasn't, but you're being really difficult right now--"

"Well you're trying to boss me around, and I hate this stupid dueling nonsense!"

"It is not nonsense! And get your wand out of my face."

"Oh yeah?" Marietta crossed her arms defiantly. "Seems like nonsense to me if you're running 'round dueling in the halls and almost getting people expelled."

"Getting who expelled? Where'd you hear that?"

"You're a big trouble-maker, Harry. Everyone knows it. I don't know why I joined this stupid club anyway..."

"I don't either."

"Maybe I'll leave then!"

“Go ahead and leave!”

“Hey! Guys...” Hermione was on her feet now, having had enough.
“Come on, why are we fighting?”

“Because she’s being a brat,” replied Angelina coolly, who was up too, glaring at Marietta.

Ron snickered.

“Hey, she is not a brat.” Cho said in Marietta’s defense. “Take that back.”

“Not until she apologizes to Harry for acting that way.” Angelina did not seem particularly mindful of Cho’s reproach. “Harry is teaching us something important, and she’s not even trying.”

“Why is it up to him to teach us anything?” Marietta spat. “You all think he’s so great, but he’s violent and moody and he’s only a fifth year! And my mum says that it’s a lie about You-Know-Who coming back, and she works at the Ministry! She talks to Aurors all the time!”

“Well your mum’s being brainwashed!” Harry shouted, his cheeks burning.

“At least I have a mum!”

Angelina stepped forth threateningly. “Watch your mouth, Edgecombe.”

“Marietta!” Cho hissed, her round cheeks flushing pink. Harry could tell she was having a hard time deciding whose defense she would take, and she was embarrassed that her friend was behaving in such a manner.

“Cho, who’s side are you on?”

“Oh, no one’s taking sides! Let’s not be childish...” Hermione tried again.

“Listen.” Harry raised his hands for quiet. Everyone who wasn’t a part of the argument had very amused expressions, but Harry was quite serious. “Marietta, I’m not forcing you to be here. If you want to quit the D.A. then…well maybe you should go ahead.” Marietta gave a sigh and looked over at Cho. After a beat, she shook her head grudgingly. “Are you sure?”

“Harry…” Cho said, but Harry waited for Marietta to nod that she was sure.

“Fine. We’re out of time, so I guess we’ll have to quit for tonight. We’ll pick up where we left off, and I promise we’ll learn the Patronus Charm next term, all right?”

There was a collective murmur of acknowledgement and everyone got to their feet, gathering their things. Harry rolled his eyes at the wall and began to count out who he’d be escorting back to their dorms. Fred walked up to him with Angelina. “You’re a much more patient leader than I’d be, chap.” He clapped Harry on the back. “After that comment about your mum, I’d have chucked her.”

“I’m not trying to chuck anybody out,” Harry muttered, opening his map and tapping it with his wand. “I solemnly swear I’m up to no good...” He studied it for a second and then gave Hermione the thumb’s up. “Okay, Hermione you guys are clear, you can go.”

“Look, someone hung mistletoe...” Luna Lovegood said suddenly, as if she had just noticed the Christmas decorations Dobby had put up before the meeting. Harry noticed that it was right above his head and she was blinking at him expectantly.

“Er…it’s probably infested with those Nargle things you’re always talking about.” he offered, stepping away quickly.

“Good thinking...” she sang, walking over to the door with Hermione and Ginny.

“I’m sorry about that, Harry...” Cho said, hovering near him. Marietta was waiting impatiently by the door to go back with Ron’s group.

Harry saw that Cho's expression of regret was genuine and he shrugged.

"It's okay, I'm not mad at you Cho."

"But your little friend..." Angelina added darkly. "She's walking on thin ice."

Harry gave Angelina a look and sighed. "She's fine. I just wish she would make up her mind about whether or not she believes me. Because frankly if she thinks I'm a liar then she shouldn't be here. Ron, your group's clear."

"She doesn't think you're a liar!" Cho assured him hastily. "I swear; I'll talk some sense into her. She's just been kind of upset because Zach is acting a bit funny towards her lately..." She leaned in a lowered her voice to a whisper. "I think he's off her—I think he fancies someone else now..."

"Oh." He blinked, not knowing what to say. "Well...that's tough, I guess. But Zach is a bit of a prat, so...tell her she shouldn't worry about it."

"I have a million times." Cho gave him a shy smile and backed away to the door. "Well goodnight Harry. Angelina. Happy Christmas if we don't see each other before we leave."

"Happy Christmas, Cho." Harry returned her smile.

"Happy Christmas..." Angelina watched her disappear through the door with Marietta, Ron, and the rest of their group. "She needs to pick her friends better." After a pause she brightened and gave him a kiss. "I know I'm ready for a pre-Christmas-Christmas party, are you?"

"Oh yeah!" Fred whooped. "George, you got it?"

George, who was standing across the room holding on to his backpack for dear life, gave his brother a thumbs up. "Got it, Fred!"

"Got what?" Harry asked, though he already knew the answer. Angelina took his hand and together she, Harry, Fred, and George left the Room of Requirement.

- The day, you move, I'm probably gonna explode
- It's true, I'm probably gonna explo-oh-oh-oh-oooh
- Woah-oh-oh-oh-ooh
- You'll pray, for proof, I'm probably makin' this up
- It's true, I'm probably makin' this u-uh-uh-uh-ooh
- Woah-oh-oh-oh-ooh
- Because...

"SCREAM IT!" Fred bellowed from his position standing on a table in the middle of the room.

The silly string he was shooting from the tip of his wand flew out onto the crowd and some of it got tangled in Harry's hair, but he didn't care at all. They were all jumping up and down and thrashing their bodies all around, the newly released Weird Sisters' album that Seamus had begrudgingly lent for the benefit of the shindig turned up to its loudest capacity. They all did as Fred had instructed, because this was the third time this song had come around and everyone knew the words by now. The consensus was that this was the favorite song of the entire Gryffindor student body.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut and jammed his fist in the air as he jumped up and down, the fire whiskey/apple cider cocktail in his other hand sloshing around in his goblet. He opened his mouth and screamed the chorus along with everyone else, the bass pumping in his ears right along with his heartbeat.

- My body is your body
- I won't tell anybody
- If you wanna use my body
- GO FOR IT, YEAH!
- My body is your body
- I won't tell anybody
- If you wanna use my body
- GO FOR IT, YEAH!
- GO FOR IT, YEAH!

Several fourth year girls exploded into a fit of giggles and toppled over the back of the couch one on top of the other in a tangle of thrashing arms and legs. They had obviously just realized what the words to the song meant. Fred hit them with some more silly string and they squealed with delight. Harry's intoxicated head swooped and he chuckled too.

The first thing that happened when he stepped through the portrait hole after they'd returned from the Room of Requirement was a light-hearted "Happy Early Christmas, Harry!" and a peck on the cheek from Ginny.

Then Dean and Seamus dragged him over to the table they had set up for beverages, including black market butterbeer they'd gotten from who-knew-where and poured him an overflowing glass of the stuff. About four beers in, the first round of that song, and after George spiked the apple cider, mayhem ensued.

First, second, and third years had been branded with stars on their foreheads by Fred and George that meant they weren't aloud to drink anything but the untainted pumpkin juice, apple cider, or eggnog. A lot of them moped about in protest for a while but soon got the cheerful bug from everyone else and simply pretended to be drunk, which to Harry seemed like much more fun to them.

It took three seventh years to sufficiently charm the Tower so that no one outside would hear the commotion, and every single one of them were taking full advantage of this.

Harry backed up, his head spinning a little, and leaned against one of the tall windows, wiping his wet hand down the front of his pants and taking another swig from his goblet. He looked around at all the decorations Katie, Alicia, Pavarti, and Ginny had helped put up. Someone had stolen Dobby's "Have A Very Harry Christmas!" baubles that Harry had snatched down and discarded from the Room of Requirement and they were now hanging from the walls, about a hundred of his own face blinking and grinning back at him. Among them was Hermione's golden tinsel that glowed; illuminating the flushed faces of all the Gryffindors now dancing and laughing and guzzling butterbeer. There was a thoughtfully decorated little

Christmas tree on the table next to Fred that had at the start of the party been bewitched to sing a carol whenever someone came near it, but Fred had kicked it several times and someone put a Silencio on it. Harry saw Lavender Brown's face slacken with disappointment and knew that the little singing tree had been her idea. Now the poor thing just sat slumped on the edge of the table, very near falling as Fred's moving feet brushed at it several times. There were knickers hanging from the walls as well, some just swinging pitifully, some bewitched to glow green or red. Harry was glad no one had gotten a hold of his, though truthfully one couldn't tell at all who any of them belonged to. That didn't stop several of them from having a guess, however.

Harry took another swig from his goblet, moving a little to the music that was now changing to a song with less of a riotous tempo. He tapped his hand against his jeans along with the beat and observed the crowd. He grinned when he spotted Ginny and Dean making out in a dark corner under some mistletoe. Now, he had noticed that Ginny and Michael weren't hanging off of each other lately and that in fact Ginny seemed completely independent of him for the last month or so—but Harry's mind had been a little preoccupied so he gave it no lingering thoughts. Only tonight, at the D.A. meeting, did he notice that Ginny had arrived with Dean, stayed close to Dean, and left with Dean on her heels. They had been talking softly and laughing quietly with each other when the party was just getting started and Harry had a chance before the chaos to actually have conversations with people.

"He's our roommate!" Ron had grumbled in exasperation at one point when Harry had pointed out the couple dancing to a slow song. "I dunno if I can take it, Harry. He'd better not try to talk about what they do together or I'll feed him one of Fred's Canary Cakes!"

Now Ron was dancing with Hermione, who despite a huge effort to refuse them had allowed Fred and George to give her spiked apple cider-. Her face was flushed pink and her bushy hair was flying around wildly but very beautifully as she let Ron twirl her and dip her. Her laughter was a high-pitched, shrill sort of giggle when she was intoxicated. Harry loved Drunk Hermione.

"Hey, why are you over here all by yourself?" Angelina appeared suddenly, beaming at him. He set his goblet down on the windowsill and stood up straight, planting a firm kiss on her mouth.

"I was just resting up for you. Wanna dance?"

"Of course!"

He took her hand and led her out onto the make-shift dance floor. They had rearranged the furniture so that it formed a giant circle in the middle of the large common room and rolled up the plush rugs. Harry much preferred dancing to his own beat when compared to having to dance at the Yule Ball. And Angelina was a good dancer. She did not make him nervous, but led him smoothly, moving her body against his in such a way that allowed him to follow along almost without effort. She curved into him, her bum fitting almost perfectly into the nook of his crotch. She let him wrap an arm around her waist. The intimate moments they shared served as practice for the way they moved together now. He closed his eyes and breathed in her scent, allowing the music to swallow them up.

The song changed again. Harry was having so much fun.

Ron tried to mimic the movements that Harry and Angelina were doing with Hermione, but Angelina saw this and shook her head sympathetically, moving away from Harry to approach them.

"Ron, you're not doing that right." She'd had a couple of goblets of spiked cider, too, and Harry took note of the playful gleam in her eyes as she reached out for Hermione. To his and Ron's astonishment, Hermione came forward and Angelina swung her around so that she was in the same position that Angelina had been when dancing with Harry.

Several people slowed their steps, turning their curious gazes to the pair, who did not seem to notice. Hermione screwed up her face like she knew what she was doing and let Angelina lead her as they danced, their movements exactly the same.

"You do it like this!" Angelina told Ron and giggled at his gobsmacked expression as she took Hermione's hips in either hand. They danced on, Hermione shimmying her hips and bending her knees to the floor and zipping up again, snapping her fingers. Angelina laughed at the silly expressions on the boys' faces as the girls embraced each other cordially.

Fred shouted from the table, pointing the girls out to everyone with his wand; it still had a few errant strands of silly string hanging from it. "That's how it's done, boys and girls! That-Is-How-It's-Done!"

George jumped up on the table with Fred and the boys began a jig; their bodies jerking around haphazardly and their red hair swinging around in their faces. They performed some routine that had everyone clapping in unison and cheering them on. Angelina released Hermione, much to Harry and Ron's dismay, and cheered too. The boys capped off their routine by jumping together from the table into the waiting arms of the crowd, finally knocking the little tree to the floor.

Once they'd been let down to their feet again, George leaned in and said in Harry's ear: "Who's trying to get their money back, now, eh?" Harry barked like Sirius did when he laughed especially hard and George gave him a high five. "Now step aside lad, I'm going to dance with your girlfriend now. Angelface! Come to Georgy!"

Angelina gave Harry a quick peck on the cheek and seconds later George had twirled her around and dipped her. Seconds after that Hermione came crashing into him, apparently so encumbered by laughter that she could scarcely talk or breathe. He helped her to her feet again and she gripped the collar of his shirt, her face red. "Harry! I-I love parties!"

Harry had to fight to keep himself from laughing at her. "That's nice, Hermione..."

"And...and I love you, too Harry! You're my best mate!"

"Same here."

It came out of nowhere. "Mistletoe!" And she kissed him on the chin before melting into a giggle fit again.

Harry deposited Hermione into Ron's waiting arms and said firmly: "We are not letting her drink ever again."

"Agreed."

The party did not last till dawn, but it was almost four in the morning when George had finally taken the last pair of knickers down from the wall with his wand. He turned to face the scattered applause from Harry, Fred, Dean, and Ron. Seamus was passed out on the couch. Ginny was asleep in Dean's lap in an armchair, and Hermione had dragged herself up the stairs with help from Angelina about twenty minutes ago. Neville was helping Harry move the last of the furniture back.

"Brilliantly executed, as usual, Georgie." Fred said, taking the still-glowing kickers from his brother and shoving them on Harry's head. Harry snatched them off and threw them at him. "Okay that's enough cleaning, lads. Let's turn in. I'm knackered."

"And still drunk." Harry added.

They all trooped upstairs. Dean gently woke Ginny and kissed her goodnight. She waved to the boys as she made her way up. Seamus had to be shocked awake with some water to the face. He shook his damp hair out like a dog and lumbered along behind them, grumbling under his breath. His accent was twice as thick when he was drunk, Harry noted, and for the whole party it had been kind of hard for him to understand what the boy was saying half the time.

Fred and George sang the old pub song quietly.

-Old Henry, Old Henry, he poured us some rum!

-Like he does every evenin' when our chores are done!

-The trolls scratch their arses, the hags they all cry!

"Hey, you got it right." Fred told his brother, impressed, as they turned a corner toward their own room. George shrugged and they draped their arms around each other, singing softly until they disappeared.

Harry fell into his bed, a big smile on his sleepy face.

Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville did pretty much the same and they all lay there for a moment listening to the happy silence until Ron sat up straight and shouted: "Dean, come on mate, my sister?"

Harry burst into laughter along with everyone else except Seamus, who had passed out again. Dean shrugged slyly and Ron chucked a pillow at him. Harry heard Dean catch it and mutter something about Ginny being a good kisser. Next thing he felt was Ron's foot land heavily in his mattress as he stepped over him to get to Dean's bed.

The boys whacked each other with pillows, Ron shouting "Take it back, wanker!" and Dean laughing "But she is!"

When they tired themselves out Ron made Dean swear not to repeat any of his goings on with Ginny in his presence and Dean agreed. Harry thought of Angelina. She had told him before the music was too loud to hold conversations that she had overheard him and Ron talking on their way to the D.A. meeting. He had attempted to deny it, feeling a small poke of embarrassment, but she saw through his facade.

"I've been thinking about it too."

He was taken aback, but now realized that he shouldn't have been surprised at all. Especially not after what they'd done the night before...

"You have?"

She nodded at him and sipped from her goblet, her eyes shining. "Uh huh..."

"So, um...what exactly have you been thinking?"

"That I think we should wait." His heart sank, which also kind of surprised him, but she continued. "And that it's a big step. You have to have certain feelings for a person—deep feelings—to do something like that. In my opinion, anyway."

"So we're not ready?"

"I don't know." She said honestly.

"Me neither..."

You have to have certain feelings.

Harry agreed with this. There was no doubt in his mind that Angelina was one of his favorite people in the world right now, and he did feel he cared for her. He didn't like to agree with Hermione in thinking that he had developed such a strong attachment to her purely because of his lack of a descent home life growing up. Though he knew that had something to do with it, he also couldn't help feeling that there was something stronger and more pure developing between them. How deeply did his feelings go? Was it just a strong curiosity to discover what sex was really like? Or was it that he wanted her to be his first...because he actually loved her?

Harry was still drunk and he was making himself confused.

"Hey, Harry I'm sorry about what I said in the hall 'bout never forgiving you if you...you know...before me." Ron mumbled drunkenly as he kicked off his pants and climbed into bed. Harry rolled over and got up to get undressed too. "I mean, it's not like I'd be that upset. I'd be proud, really. But, blimey Harry!"

Harry frowned at his friend, reaching up to pull his shirt over his messy head. "What?"

"You do realize you're setting a standard for Hermione that she probably expects me to follow?" Ron said seriously, his arm mid-pull as he was getting under the covers.

"That's rubbish."

"No it's not. She's always looking at the two of you all cozy-like. I can see it in her face."

"She's just glad I'm finally getting over my years of physical and mental abuse..." Harry intoned sarcastically, though it hurt him somewhat to joke about such things. He slipped on his pajama bottoms and patted Hedwig gently in her cage before climbing into his bed again and removing his glasses.

"What was that?"

"Nothing..." Harry sighed and closed his eyes. "I don't think Hermione expects you to act any way other than like yourself, Ron."

"More like she wants me to be all romantic and bold like that sausage head Viktor Krum..."

"So be bold and romantic..." Harry was falling asleep.

"Easy for you to say."

Harry smiled. "Stop fretting, you git. Enjoy it: you've got a girlfriend."

He didn't hear what Ron said next. He slipped away, into cool darkness. His chest rose and fell rhythmically. The dream he had at first was a funny reflection of the night's events. He was arguing with Marietta in the D.A. room. She was yelling at him that he had lured her there under false pretenses: he had apparently promised her one hundred and fifty chocolate frog cards if she joined the D.A.

"What? No I didn't..." he told her, but she insisted.

"Yes, that's why I joined this stupid club in the first place, but we haven't gotten a single card since we started! You're a liar, Harry! If you don't give me those cards, I'm leaving!"

And then Cho butted in, saying that last year Cedric had given them loads of cards, and she pulled the things from her robes in handfuls, chucking them at him viciously. "I'm sorry Marietta said that about

your mum, Harry, but you really should have given her the cards like you promised."

"How about Harry's Firebolt?" Hermione suggested, now suddenly replacing Cho. "Would that make up for it, Marietta?"

Harry was on the point of telling them both that there was no way he was giving up his Firebolt just to keep her there and that it was absurd anyway because they knew perfectly well that Umbridge had it. But the dream changed...

And he was gliding on his stomach between metal bars and across smooth stone. His body felt sleek, powerful, and flexible. He knew it was dark, but he could see things in shimmering colors, almost like night-vision. And he came upon a man, who was sitting on the floor, sleeping with his chin sunk low to his chest. Harry licked the air, tasting the man's scent.

Harry had the overwhelming urge to bite the man, but he had to master himself—he had work to do. Important work for his master. He needed to find something...

But the man was stirring awake now, and seconds later he had spotted Harry and jumped to his feet. He saw the man's hand go immediately into the folds of his robes, and as he withdrew a wand from them Harry knew he had no choice. He reared his sleek body upward from the floor, almost meeting the man's own height, opening his mouth wide.

He felt his fangs sink exquisitely into the man's flesh as he struck once, twice, three times...blood spilling from the wounds Harry made. On the fourth strike, he heard the man's delicate rib crack under the force of his powerful jaw. The man yelled in pain and fell like a sack of rice to the floor. Harry could feel the blood oozing down his long body and saw it splattering on the floor.

His forehead was burning hot, and then it started to throb something awful....he wanted to scream at the surge of searing pain that was now shooting through his scar.

“Harry! Harry wake up!”

He was covered in icy sweat from head to foot. Ron was shaking him. He was all twisted up in his covers and he fought to get free, his forehead feeling as if someone had stuck it in the fireplace. When he had managed to release himself from the twisted sheets, he rolled over and vomited right there on the floor next to his bed. When the mixture of apple cider, eggnog, and chunks of his dinner finally stopped gushing out of him, Harry raised his aching head and searched out Ron's blurry face.

“Ron, y-your dad...” He managed through the dry heaves that were racking through his abdomen. “Your dad’s been attacked...”

Chapter Twenty-Six: It's Delicate

The heavy weight of exhaustion was upon him, but Harry was afraid to sleep.

He kept trying to convince himself, even while his breathing slowed and his eyes slid closed as he lay there face down on the ragged black comforter, that if Phineas Nigellus' message from Dumbledore was to stay put...it meant the old wizard didn't really believe Harry was a threat to anyone. Harry's body was finally succumbing to his depriving it of sleep, and he stiffened a bit, not wanting to fall into that snake's body again and hurt somebody else...Sirius...Ron...Mrs. Weasley...Ginny...

His mind was so thick with confusing speculations and worry over what could happen that it was giving him a headache. His scar throbbed ominously. He was angry but sad. He was afraid but so, so tired.

He felt as if Hogwarts and the night before weren't just mere miles or hours behind him, but hidden away in some dream land now. It seemed impossible that less than twenty-four hours ago he had been dancing with Angelina, happy and oblivious. Now he was here in the dark, dusty confines of his and Ron's bedroom at Grimmauld Place, wishing that he could be back there in the common room by the warm fire with Angelina at his side. A rolling, diffused image manifested itself in his exhausted mind, showing him Angelina panting his name with her face illuminated by firelight. But the image rolled away again quickly, replaced by the solemn scene he'd only just escaped from—the Weasley children, himself, and Sirius waiting up in the kitchen for any word on Author.

He fell asleep, finally.

Immediately Harry found himself touching down in front of the black door he had been trying for months to reach. He had finally gotten here, at its threshold, and he was staring at it with pinched anticipation. He knew there was something behind this door that he wanted very badly—with all his heart he wanted it, and Harry reached out with a shaky hand to push it open...it wouldn't budge.

He tried again, almost panicked and whispering to himself desperately in his sleep, "Come on...open!" It stayed fast in its stubborn denial of his attempts for entry, and Harry growled under his breath, his scar prickling hotly. He had to open it! He had come so far...only to have it locked? How...? Where...? What could he use to open it? A key? A spell...?

Harry jerked awake at the sound of the bedroom door creaking open and he lifted his head slightly from the bed, feeling drool on his chin.

"Mum says dinner's ready but you don't have to come down now if you wanna sleep some more, Harry..." it was Ron.

Harry tried in vain to turn his tired body over to face his friend, but Ron had closed the door and gone again before he abandoned the effort. Harry knew that Ron was afraid of him, and the others probably were, too. He didn't blame them. He wished for Angelina's soft, warm body next to his...if only to relieve him of his cold stiffness. But he realized with a sinking heart that she would probably be afraid of him too if she were here. He remembered the look on her face when he had screamed at her with Voldemort's voice in the Room of Requirement.

Letting out a long, groggy sigh Harry wiped his chin and curled up into a ball on the bed. He fell asleep again in a matter of minutes, this time dreaming of flying on his Firebolt through a field of tall grass... Harry—bitterly holding onto the memory of them all staring at him anxiously as they listened to the adults talk about him being possessed by Voldemort at St. Mungo's—imposed a brooding wall of solitude around himself all the next day.

They were all helping Sirius decorate the house for the holidays.

He could hear Sirius singing Christmas carols loudly and with earnest merriment throughout the house, but Harry could not let his godfather's good mood touch him. He sat alone in a cold, unused room for most of the morning until Mrs. Weasley tried to lure him downstairs for lunch. He ignored her and retreated further up into the

darkness to Buckbeak's room where he remained the rest of the afternoon until the white cloudless sky grew dim as night fell.

At least Sirius won't be alone for Christmas...he thought cheerlessly as he fed the hippogriff dead rats. But I'm not going down there. I'm going to let them all keep talking about me—let them try and guess if I'm up here channeling Voldemort right now if that's what they think of me...

He thought of many things as the day progressed; mostly of how scared he had been during those terribly long hours as they waited for word from Mrs. Weasley about her husband's condition. He thought of how Dumbledore refused to look at him when they'd been in his office. He remembered, with a particularly strong pang of fear, the way he had felt when he finally caught the old wizard's eyes just before they took the portkey to the house...how he had wanted so much to bite him, hurt him...the hatred he felt...the hatred that he knew was not his own.

Harry thought most of all, though, of how much he missed Angelina. He wondered, as he sat alone in the dark listening to Sirius sing loudly somewhere below him, what she was doing. Hopefully she wasn't too worried about him, and hopefully she hadn't been given too many details about what happened. He didn't think he could handle knowing that the last thing Angelina learned before she went off to Cannes was that her boyfriend had had a vision in which he had been a snake and brutally attacked a man. Mingling with his fear of Voldemort's hold on him, his resentment of the others, and his determination to be alone were Harry's vivid memories of the intimate moments that he and Angelina shared before all this.

He missed her. It had not even been two full days, but he missed her very much and he sat around all day imagining what her hair smelled like...what it felt like brushing against his face as he held her close. Also he sat still for long periods of time with his eyes closed, mentally replaying that time in the Room of Requirement...that time on the couch in the common room...when Harry wasn't sitting in the dark wanting to have sex with something he was fuming over his current situation. This odd combination of thoughts did little to improve his piss-poor mood.

Now Harry tossed Buckbeak another dead rat and sighed forlornly, trying to ignore the gnawing feeling of hunger in his empty stomach.

He heard Mrs. Black screaming bloody murder and knew that someone had arrived, though he dismissed it as Mundungus perhaps, until a minute later he was startled by hard knocking on Buckbeak's door. "Harry, stop feeling sorry for yourself and come out of there." It was Hermione.

Harry hesitated but went and opened the door, the harsh light from the hallway causing him to squint. "I thought you were off skiing for the holidays..."

She shook her head and smiled at him. "No, I came straight here from school. Dumbledore told me what happened. Are you all right?" He gave her a look and she realized that the answer was obvious. "Well I suppose not, but you shouldn't be hiding up here. The others told me what happened at the hospital yesterday."

"I don't want to talk about that." Harry tried to retreat again into the dark, but Hermione clicked her tongue at him.

"Come on, Harry. I came all the way here..."

After explaining how she told her parents that she needed to stay at Hogwarts to study, she grabbed his hand (hers still cold from being out in the snow) and dragged him down to his and Ron's bedroom where he found everyone waiting for him. There was a fire lit in the fireplace by Ron's bed and there were sandwiches that Mrs. Weasley had made. Ron and Ginny were sitting on his bed; Fred and George on the floor with a chess set between them. Harry looked at them all looking at him and found not one single expression of fear or an accusatory glance among them. Still, he could not let go of his deeply rooted resentment of his situation, and he hovered at the door while Hermione took off her coat and hat and gloves.

"You stink, mate..." Fred said nonchalantly, not looking up from his queen, who was busy decapitating George's knight. Harry frowned,

thinking that this was some sort of insult, but then he remembered that he had just spent the last two hours feeding Buckbeak dead rats.

He shifted on his feet, feeling hot all of a sudden. The fire was roaring and crackling cheerfully in the fireplace. Hermione coughed and sat down on Ron's bed. "Perhaps you'd like a nice shower?" She suggested, reaching over and taking a sandwich from the platter sitting next to her. "It might make you feel better and then we can all talk."

"Talk about what?" Harry said quickly, latching onto the statement as an opportunity to vent some of the resentment he'd been holding onto all day. "How everyone here thinks I'm a nutter?"

"Oh, please, stop being such a baby," Ginny rolled her eyes at him.

"It's true!" Harry snapped, rounding on her now. "You all think I'm crazy and dangerous. Admit it!"

"I'll do no such thing because that isn't what we think at all, Harry, and if you hadn't been hiding all day we could've told you that!" she answered hotly, glaring right back at him.

Harry opened his mouth and closed it again, wanting to yell some more but not knowing how to articulate himself properly. Instead he turned around and stomped out of the room, heading for the master washroom at the end of the hall. He ran into Sirius, who was coming out of his own bedroom, and the man grasped him happily by the shoulders, preventing him from passing.

"Harry!" he greeted, smiling. "You've decided to join the land of the living. What on earth have you been doing all day?" Sirius sniffed at Harry and barked loudly as he laughed in amusement. "Been feeding Buckbeak, have you? You're spoiling him, you know."

"Sirius, I need to get to the shower," Harry said tersely, avoiding his godfather's eyes.

Sirius' smile slowly shrank and he patted Harry on the shoulder sympathetically. "All right, sure. But I don't want you to disappear on me again. I really want to spend time with you."

Harry allowed himself to soften at these words and he nodded, allowing the shaggy wizard to ruffle his hair affectionately. "Okay Sirius."

"There's a good lad!" And he began to sing again, passing Harry and jogging down the stairs. "God rest ye merry hippogriffs, da, da, da, da dee dum!"

The ebony-haired young man watched his godfather disappear down the stairs and allowed himself to smile a little, shaking his head in wonderment. It was good to see Sirius so jolly, Harry decided. At least one of us should get to enjoy the holiday, he thought tiredly, turning to resume his course to the washroom. Inside, he closed the door and stripped slowly, frowning in thought as he went through the motions of taking off his shoes and socks and jeans and shirt and finally his underwear. Harry looked at himself in the mirror before he reached over to turn on the shower and scowled at his pale, dirty appearance. It was almost laughable, the contrast between himself and Angelina.

He stuck his head under the shower nozzle and let the hot water run over his hair...he closed his eyes and tried to make his head blank.

Of course, this proved unsuccessful, and he thought of that huge snake rearing back and striking...face after face of the people he cared about. It was a bit like when Mrs. Weasley found the boggart hiding in Sirius' cabinet. He forced this thought away and focused on the last thing he and Angelina talked about before he had gone to sleep. She said she didn't think they were ready for sex yet and he had agreed with her. Now he realized that they should have talked more about it—he would have told her exactly how he was feeling. He would have explained that yes he was nervous about it, but the feelings rolling around inside him for her were strong—getting stronger by the day. Especially now...

A part of him was glad she couldn't be there to witness everything that was happening; to speculate with the others on whether or not he was the weapon Voldemort was planning to use against Dumbledore. But a bigger part of him really wished she was with him...he sighed, allowing some of the warm water to sink into his mouth. Spitting it out in a childish squirt, Harry turned off the shower and stepped out, feeling clean but not emotionally any better than before.

When he returned to the bedroom he found only Ginny sitting there, playing with Crookshanks.

"Where is everybody?" he asked before he remembered that he was still mad at her and the rest of them.

"Gone to help Mum set the table for dinner."

Harry hesitated, staring at her. She didn't seem at all perturbed by his being clothed in nothing but a bathrobe and he actually didn't either. He was only thinking of wanting to be alone again. No matter what Hermione said, he knew that they all thought he had Voldemort inside him, waiting to come out.

"Oh..." he muttered, avoiding her gaze as he came into the room and deposited his dirty clothes on the floor next to his bed.

"You know..." she said quietly to his back. "I understand that you probably feel really confused and upset right now Harry, but did it ever occur to you that you actually know someone who has been possessed by You-Know-Who? Someone who could tell you what it's really like?"

Harry stood very still, the water dripping slowly from his hair, thinking about what she was telling him. He realized with a heavy pang of guilt that she was right. He had been acting really stupid—he could have asked Ginny about it all along. Turning around to face her, he sighed and said "I'm sorry, Ginny..." and he really meant it.

"You should be."

Harry wasted no time. “So...” he made his way slowly over to her, where he sat down on Ron’s bed at her side and reached over to pet Crookshanks too. The cat purred softly and stretched between them. “So do you think I’m being possessed then?”

“Have you found yourself unable to remember what you’d been doing for hours at a time? Woken up somewhere without remembering how you got there at all?”

“No...”

“Then you’re not being possessed.”

Harry felt relief wash over him like cool water and he ran a hand through his damp hair. “It was just so real, though. Like I was actually there. I could even...” he hesitated but Ginny was looking at him as though she had prepared herself for whatever he might say. “I could even feel the blood...when I bit him.”

“It wasn’t you, Harry.” She touched him on the arm softly. “No one thinks it was. We’re all scared, that’s true, but not of you.”

He felt so glad to hear that. Okay, so maybe he had overreacted. Maybe it was his guilt that drove him so far into himself, not wanting to allow room for the possibility that they all might actually want to talk to him instead of about him. Maybe Ron wasn’t scared of him after all...

“This sucks.” Harry clicked his tongue and shook his head at the ratty carpet. Ginny gave him a funny look.

“You’re telling me?”

“I just wish things were different, that’s all...”

“Like how?”

Harry shrugged languidly. “I wish I were skiing like Hermione is supposed to be or in France with Angelina...”

She smiled, letting her hand drop from his arm. “I wish...I wish we were back at the Burrow. Mum would be making us help her decorate. And Dad would just be arriving, probably, shouting ‘hello, Weasley’s!’ as usual...” he watched her eyes narrow wistfully and felt really guilty again.

All of a sudden, too, he felt like talking. Maybe it was because he had gone so long without voicing any of his thoughts that day or the night before, but he found himself telling her all about the things swimming in his head just then. She passed him the platter of sandwiches and he hungrily shoved a couple of them in his mouth, chewing around his words as he told her about his fears from before when he had been attacked by Voldemort’s anger in the showers and after the D.A. meeting. They went over the facts: he could not be being possessed by Voldemort because for one thing there was no way he could get from his bed at Hogwarts to the Ministry and back in such a short period of time. Also Ginny explained that Ron had told them he saw Harry thrashing about during the night—he had been right there in the room the whole time. No matter how real it felt to him, it couldn’t have been anything more than one of the strange glimpses into Voldemort’s consciousness that he had experienced before.

After a bit of convincing on Ginny’s part they finally moved on, and Harry also found himself talking to her about his unrelenting anger towards Malfoy and how confused he was about helping Angelina deal with what happened.

“I’m still mad about that,” he confided, biting into another sandwich. “I don’t think...I mean I don’t think he actually you know, did anything to her. Because-because aren’t you supposed to be changed by something like that? Like severely changed, even if you don’t remember everything?”

Ginny nodded forlornly. “I’ve never known anyone who’s gone through that, but it seems to me that if somebody actually...hurt me...that way, then I wouldn’t want anyone to touch me.”

Harry had a fleeting image of the thing that happened on the couch in the common room and swallowed.

They sat trying to wrap their young brains around it, the fire still crackling merrily for them. After a moment of pondering and, at least for now, his terrible fears about Voldemort shifting so they weren't sticking out at the front of his mind, Harry spoke again. He Rolled Crookshanks to and fro by the belly with his hand and uttered, "I think she's hiding how she really feels from me. And I don't know what to do about it. I just keep letting her do...whatever."

"So? What's wrong with that? Harry, there is a reason she didn't tell you everything. If it were me...knowing what you were dealing with at the time, I wouldn't want to add to that. That's probably how Angelina felt."

"You mean she didn't think I could handle it?" Harry asked, feeling a stab of irritation from his conversation with Phineas Nigellus the night before. "Everyone keeps saying I'm too young for this and too young for that. And she doesn't think I'm ready for us to--" he stopped abruptly, not wishing to discuss the subject of losing his virginity with Ginny.

She frowned at him, shaking her head. "Harry you're not going to get angry at her now, for pity's sake."

He sighed again for what felt like the hundredth time. "No...but somehow beating Malfoy's arse just doesn't feel like enough."

"Have you guys ever thought about going to a teacher? Telling them what you know?"

He scoffed. "Umbridge wouldn't take Angelina's story seriously, I'll bet. No matter if Malfoy's on her good side or not."

"So why does it have to be Umbridge?"

Harry thought about this as Crookshanks licked his fingers. He had done a ridiculous amount of work to keep Malfoy's head from under the ax after the duel, but only to keep himself from going down as well. Now they had escaped that noose, there wasn't any reason why he shouldn't turn Malfoy in. But, how could he prove it? There was the playbook—if he couldn't get Malfoy for what he'd done to

Angelina he could at least nail him for the playbook. The problem was that it was months later and Angelina had it back in her possession for several weeks now. Would that make a difference? Who cares about a stupid playbook anyway when Voldemort is sending his bloody snake out to attack people? He shook his head to clear it and muttered that he didn't know.

Harry's stomach groaned and he realized that he was still hungry; he could smell dinner cooking bellow and fancied he could use a nice hot meal. Ginny, apparently operating on the same idea, stood up and stretched.

"Don't worry about it, Harry, it'll work itself out. Get dressed and let's eat."

Harry soon found over the next few days that he would much rather spend his time "among the living", as Sirius had put it, than stewing in the dark by himself. He was reminded gently by the ever-growing feeling of cheerfulness that was coming over him that Christmas was near, and he simply could not help letting go of his anger and resentment. Especially when in the company of his godfather. Sirius' good cheer spread easily to everyone he came in contact with. Harry knew it was because he was happy to have visitors, and the two of them tramped through the house decorating and singing carols for hours.

Harry enjoyed hearing his laugh like a bark. With each day went up more decorations. Mrs. Weasley thought the house elves' heads lining the first floor hall looked rather funny (if a bit macabre) wearing Father Christmas hats and white beards. They spread magic snow along the halls and draped tinsel everywhere. They hung gold and silver Christmas baubles along the windows and from some of the elves' long pointy noses. A large white Christmas tree, provided by Mundungus, sat in the main living room, blocking the Black Family Tree. It glimmered warmly at night and Harry enjoyed sitting in there with Hermione, Ginny, and Ron after dinner on a couple of quiet evenings as the snow fell silently outside.

Hermione admitted that despite not liking to have disappointed her parents, she was rather glad to be at the house for Christmas. "Ron

and I have had the opportunity to really be alone for the first time," she whispered to Harry as they sat near the tree one night. "And Harry...he's so much sweeter than I thought!"

Harry grinned and out of the corner of his eye he could see Ron blush, even though the ginger-haired boy was pretending not to hear as he played Wizard Chess with Ginny.

With two days till Christmas, they took a trip to Diagon Alley for shopping. Sirius stayed behind but he gave Mrs. Weasley a small list a bit covertly, though Harry caught them talking quietly. He wished his godfather could come with them—walk out in the fresh air and enjoy the snow, pick out the presents he wanted to get on his own, or have hot chocolate with them when they stopped for lunch. They ran into Lupin, Tonks, and Mad Eye Moody and chatted for a while. Harry confided in Remus his thoughts about Sirius being shut in.

"Harry, he understands that he cannot risk exposure," was his soft reply. He patted Harry paternally on the shoulder. "I've had many talks with him. He is restless, yes...but he isn't stupid, either. He's just very happy to have you and the others for the holidays. You have no idea how much it means to him that you're there, despite the circumstances."

"I suppose you're right," Harry agreed half-heartedly.

Remus frowned and pulled him a little away from the others, who were all chatting about which shops they wanted to visit next. "And how are you doing? Still having dreams about You-Know-Who?"

"No..."

The older, exhausted-looking man studied him silently for a moment, as if trying to see traces of Voldemort on his skin. "No. No, that's good news. Dumbledore is worried about you, you know."

"Oh I've certainly got that impression from him. He's been just smothering me with concern lately." Remus raised his eyebrows at Harry's sardonic tone. "Sorry." Harry corrected himself, advertiring his gaze.

"Are you upset with Dumbledore, Harry?"

Harry hesitated, thinking of the moment in the Headmaster's office when he wanted to strike at the old man, but shrugged. "Not upset I guess. Just really confused. He hasn't talked to me in months."

"He's got a lot to deal with at the moment." Remus offered, though his tone told Harry that there was more to it than that. "He never does anything without a good reason. You must understand that."

"It just seems like he's hiding something from me."

Remus didn't answer, or it was that he couldn't—Mrs. Weasley was beckoning to Harry to join her and the others as Tonks and Mad Eye were saying their farewells. Giving Harry's shoulder a reassuring squeeze, Lupin stepped away and waved politely to Molly as he rejoined Mad Eye and Tonks.

"See you around, Harry." Tonks called, giving him a casual wave. Harry waved and fell into step with Ron and Hermione, going over his conversation with Lupin in his head. He never does anything without a good reason...well, Harry thought, I hope Lupin is right.

They shopped for most of the day, though it was mainly Hermione and Harry who took up their time. Hermione was buying gifts for her parents and Harry was combing the Alley for a present to buy Angelina. He racked his brain for what girls like her would fancy: jewelry? He saw a nice necklace with a heart charm on it but Ginny made a face at it and he passed on the idea. Clothes? Hermione did not like the cashmere sweater he pointed out—she said it wasn't something Angelina would wear. Ron seemed quite pleased with himself—he had a little smile on his face once he had gotten Hermione a present and walked along behind Harry, annoying him. Harry was beginning to feel hopeless about it. Angelina was the last person he bought for; he had gotten everyone else's presents, including one for Sirius. It was a grooming kit for Buckbeak that came with really nice leather handling gloves--Sirius was always getting nipped on the fingers by the temperamental beast.

They were idling in a book shop when Harry spotted it. He gave an excited "Oh!" and hurried along the aisle he was in with Hermione until he came to it. It was sitting among others like it, but somehow this one stood out to Harry. He knew she would like it the moment he laid eyes on it. "Oh Harry, that is lovely!" Hermione gasped when he took it from the shelf and brought it to her. "Angelina will love it."

It was a leather-bound journal with a small gold clasp. The clasp was magicked so that only a password spoken by its owner would open it, the shopkeeper explained to Harry when he bought it. The leather was smooth and chocolate brown, just like Angelina's skin. He had the shopkeeper engrave it in gold lettering with his wand: Angel.

Hermione squealed with envy and delight. Harry blushed and tucked the now gift-wrapped present under his arm protectively as they left the shop. They made one last stop at a post office next to Olivander's Wands so that Harry and Hermione could send off their gifts. The mean-looking owl he tied his gift for Angelina to seemed aggravated by the fact that it would have to leave its warm cage for the cold journey to France. Harry thought it a shame that the post office employed such disgruntled birds.

When they returned to Grimmauld Place weighed down with parcels Sirius met them at the door, quickly offering to help them with their loads. "Did you get those things I asked for, Molly?" he asked Mrs. Weasley quietly as he juggled some of Hermione's bags.

She smiled at him. "Of course. I've got them right here."

He returned her smile and Harry felt himself grinning, too. Despite Mr. Weasley being in the hospital and the nasty business of Harry feeling he was the reason for it, he fancied this Christmas was going to be pretty nice. Sirius hummed to himself as he stowed their parcels in the den, even though Mrs. Black was screaming again.

That evening Mundungus brought armloads of various items that he had gotten from who-knew-where. Aside from the festive goblets and wreathes of holly by the sack full, he brought them a Muggle record player and a crate of dusty old records. Asked by Mrs. Weasley where he got such a thing he stammered and checked his watch, saying he had to be off and leaving them with it.

Harry, Hermione, and Ron rifled through the old records. Not many of them were Christmas-related. Ron held one up and made a face at the image of a black Muggle with a wide, bright smile. “ ‘Nat King Cole’s Christmas Special.’ ” he read aloud. “That’s a funny name...Who’s Nat King Cole?”

Hermione shrugged and took it from him, flipping it over to the back to read the liner notes. “I’ve heard my dad talking about him, I think. He’s a Muggle singer that was famous a long time ago.”

“And who’s this?” Ron held up one with a lady who had a bandana tied around her neck. She had an even bigger and brighter smile than the man on the other record and her black hair shined.

“Ooh, that’s Patsy Cline, I’ve heard of her. She’s got a really beautiful voice...” Hermione put Nat King Cole’s record back in the crate and stood up to walk over to where Sirius was trying to figure out how to get the record player to work. He stood frowning at it, tapping his wand against his lips. “Um...here you just put a record on like this...” he stepped aside and watched her take out Patsy Cline’s record and place it on the player. “And then you take the needle...” Hermione carefully set the needle on the record as it began to spin softly. Seconds later a slow, old country track began and Patsy’s throaty croon filled the den.

-Crazy...

-Crazy for feelin’ so lonely...

-I’m crazy...

-Crazy for feelin’ so blue...

-I knew...

-You’d love me as long as you wanted...

-And then someday...

-You'd leave me for somebody new...

"Ahh...that's not bad..." Sirius said softly, giving Hermione's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "I've not had one of these that wasn't bewitched to play automatically. Hmm...Mundungus probably stole the records as well..." he added somewhat critically, but then brightened again and gestured that the others gather around the tree. He conjured a platter of hot chocolate with his wand and passed a cup to each of them. Fred and George came down from upstairs.

"What's this we're listening to?" George asked, taking a cup from Sirius. "It's depressing."

"I think it's nice." Ginny said, crossing her legs as she sat next to Harry and sipping gingerly from her steaming cup.

"It's girly," Ron offered but quickly shrugged when Hermione frowned at him. "I mean...it's okay?"

"Hmmm..." Sirius intoned, sitting comfortably in a shabby black arm chair and squinting at the tree. "It's very sad. She's in love, poor girl. And it doesn't sound as if the bloke in question fancies her in return."

Harry watched his godfather thoughtfully, taking in the sight of the lights on the Christmas tree flickering in his dark eyes. There was so much he did not know about this man, yet he knew with certainty that he could grow to love him. It was mostly because he was one of the last remaining people who could connect Harry with his parents, and because Harry knew that Sirius cared for him a great deal in return. It had to do with the fact that somewhere deep inside Harry felt connected to Sirius through years of loneliness and hurt—years of abuse and abandonment. Sirius because of his loathsome family and then his torment in Azkaban; Harry because his mother and father had been murdered in front of him when he was just a baby and he had the unfortunate fate of being raised in a cold, unloving house for fourteen dark years.

When the song was over Sirius winked at Harry and stood up to switch records, this time playing a traditional Christmas carol.

Everyone sank into their own thoughts a bit as a choir of children sang “Carol of the Bells.”

On the night of Christmas Eve, Harry lay himself down on his bed in his and Ron’s bedroom, his arms folded behind his head, and tried to picture the look on Angelina’s face when she opened the present he had sent off. He hoped she liked it. If Hermione’s reaction to it was any indication, however, she would. Harry smiled to himself. His Angel...it was kind of corny but sweet. He liked it. And he missed her.

Harry heard the floorboards creak and lifted his head a bit to peer over at the door. He thought maybe it would be Hermione coming to drag him into another brainstorming session regarding his visions of Voldemort, but he discovered to his surprise that it was Sirius calling. The older wizard hovered at the door, his handsome but gaunt face a mask of awkward curiosity. “I disturbed you? Sorry, I’ll just--”

“No, no...Sirius come in.” Harry sat up on his elbows and watched his godfather step into the room, closing the door behind him. He was wearing an old white collared shirt, black slacks and no shoes. His dark hair, which was graying slightly in some places, hung loosely but neatly to his shoulders. He gave Harry a self-conscious smile and sat down tentatively on the edge of the bed. “Hi...”

Sirius chuckled. “Hi, Harry.”

There was a beat in which Sirius’ eyes swam with firelight from the fireplace and Harry felt like something profound was about to happen, but then the older wizard clapped his hands once and beamed. “So! How are you?”

“Okay. You?”

“Better.” He replied honestly. Harry watched him scratch his head. “I’m glad you’re here. I mean, I know the circumstances are a little...tough.”

“Yeah...” Harry was drawn into dark territory mentally for a moment before Sirius spoke again.

“Did you send your parcel off?”

“Huh?”

“The present for your girlfriend.”

“Oh, right. Took care of it.” Sirius broke into a lopsided grin all of a sudden and Harry blushed. “What?”

“Nothing...nothing.” He gestured to nothing in particular, a bit of a raspy chuckle escaping his smiling lips. “You’re growing up, Harry. Girls already, I’ve missed so much!”

“Oh...yeah. Well, you’d be the only one who thinks I’ve grown up.”

“Nonsense! This girl, she’s older, right? I think that’s what Ron said.”

“She’s a seventh year, yeah.” Harry watched Sirius get more comfortable, scooting up on the bed and lying down beside him. He lay down again too, and the two of them were side by side staring up at the black canopy, their hands folded behind their heads.

“Hmm...pretty?” Harry wondered what kind of question that was, but Sirius added: “Not that she wouldn’t be. I mean what’s she look like?”

“Um...she’s beautiful to me. Tall...long hair...nice skin.”

“Well good for you Harry.” Another pause, and Harry could feel Sirius’ chest rising and falling next to him. He was emanating body heat. Unbidden Harry had a fleeting thought: how delicate the fabric of time was. The here and now...Sirius was lying next to him, when minutes before he was not. Harry had gone years not knowing this man; not knowing of his existence or that he had been his father’s best friend. Now this man was all he had left of his father. And he was here—physically here breathing next to him when his father was not. When he could just as easily be in Azkaban still. Or worse...killed by those Dementors. He shuddered and couldn’t figure out where this thought had come from. Sirius turned to him and frowned. “You all right?”

“Uh huh...Sirius?”

“Yeah?”

“Have you ever been in...er...I mean do you know what it’s like to be...in-in love?”

His godfather took a deep breath and turned to stare up at the canopy again. Another long pause followed, and Harry waited. After a moment, though he couldn’t see it, Sirius smiled slowly. “Sure, I’ve been in love.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Well it was a long time ago. I was a little older than you when it started, but not much.”

“And...how did you know?” Harry licked his lips but refrained from turning his curious gaze on the man. “I mean, did you just know or did you have to really think about it for a while?”

Sirius chuckled again. It came out like a faint snort. “Do you think you’re in love, Harry?”

Harry shrugged, replying honestly: “I don’t know.”

“Well...” and Sirius turned to prop himself up on his side, the lopsided grin still present. “When you look at her--does your heart sort of...” he tapped his chest several times in rapid, uneven succession, that grin of his spreading. “Skip a beat?” Harry nodded. “And when you kiss her--I assumed you’ve kissed?” Another nod. “When you kiss her what do you feel?”

Harry thought for a moment. “I feel warm. Warm all over.”

“Not like the kind of warmth you get from sitting by a fire, or being out in the sun, but warmth inside, right? Rolling...pulsing...feeling.”

Harry could not help smiling at his godfather’s spirited explanations. “Sure. Like that.”

"Your father once told me..." Sirius dropped his hand from his chest and sighed. "...that he knew he loved your mother when she slapped him."

Harry frowned. "Huh?"

A loud, sharp bark of laughter. "Ha! Yes, yes. They had argued, about something silly probably, knowing them, and she gave him a good slap across the face." He nudged Harry's cheek with his knuckles. Harry smiled in wonder. "He said he felt his anger rise to the breaking point, but instead of yelling at her or doing anything rash, he looked into her eyes and thought 'my god I love this crazy woman! She's lost her marbles, hitting me like that, but she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen!' "

Sirius laughed heartily for a little bit, and Harry's awed smile remained as he tried to picture the pretty red-headed woman and the bespectacled man in the picture Hagrid had given him first year arguing, slapping each other, and making up on the spot. He could not picture this, but it did not diminish his gladness to hear Sirius tell the story. He had so little information about his parents that anything new he learned, he treasured.

"Well I don't fancy having Angelina slap me across the face to make me realize how I really feel about her..."

"Angelina...hmmm...pretty name. Little Angel. I'll bet she is beautiful..."

Crookshanks jumped onto the bed and pawed Harry's stomach. He sat up on his elbows again and watched the cat sniff curiously at the tips of Sirius' hair. Petting the round cat, Harry asked: "So because my heart skips a beat and I feel warm inside that means I'm in love?"

"No, Harry..." Sirius answered light-heartedly. "No, you've got to..." he stood up abruptly and began pacing the length of the room. "You've got to think back. Think back to before you got together with her. Before your first kiss, before all of that. Can you picture..." he stopped pacing and knelt down before his godson, his eyes twinkling. Harry was hanging on his every word. "Can you picture one single

second without her affection in your life? Do you remember what it felt like not to have her with you—with you as in with you, as in yours?”

Harry was unaware that he was panting slightly as he shook his head. It dawned on him—Sirius was right. His mentality over the days and nights of the past months had been primarily focused on Angelina. Angelina in the morning, the afternoon, and the evening. Before she had told him that she fancied him and he knew he fancied her back there had been...blimey he couldn't remember. Umbridge? Yes, she was there but her enchanted quill did not do much to impress him now. Quidditch...sure. But, then, that led to Angelina again.

Even now...when he was so worried about this Voldemort business, and poor Mr. Weasley was in St. Mungo's...his mind still persisted in presenting him with the image of her beautiful face. And how he missed her. It was like an aching; like when his scar hurt but not in such an ominous fashion. And the time he spent these days imagining being with her; what it would be like to be inside her; how hopeful he was at the prospect of seeing her again when they went back to school...

“No? Right? Yes, you see Harry love isn’t something that one can easily define by kisses and...hormones. It’s more than just empty words...all boring signposts that most people think mean everything.” He scoffed, his eyes narrowing as he looked down to stare at the ratty carpet. He was still on his knees. “I was in love once. But I kept it to myself and I’m afraid to say she didn’t love me back. She loved someone...well it wasn’t me.”

Harry watched him stand up again.

“I want to tell you something Harry, now that we’re talking about this...” Sirius turned to the fire and stared into it, his hair hanging in his face. “I was in prison for most of my young life. Azkaban is...it’s a bad place to end up for a bloke who was just hitting his prime, like me. Granted I had moved on from school and had been fighting for a good cause for a while, but still I hadn’t really done anything truly great, you know? I barely blinked before they were telling me I would spend the rest of my life in that godforsaken place. So Harry if you

think you're in love with this girl Angelina...don't hesitate to let her know. Don't even think of not telling her. I made some mistakes...I felt the way I just described to you and I did not speak of my feelings to the girl I loved. I thought I couldn't...but in the end I was a coward and it didn't matter much after that. In a heartbeat all my chances were gone..."

"Did you go to school with her?"

His eyes were still narrowed and he nodded distractedly. "...school? Yes, we were at Hogwarts together."

"What was her name?" Harry asked, studying the far away look in the tormented wizard's eyes.

Sirius was quiet for a long time, seemingly lost in his own, dark thoughts about the past and the love he could never express, before he snapped out of it and smiled sadly. "Her name...? That doesn't matter, Harry. What matters is that you believe me when I tell you—you don't want to make the same mistake I did."

Harry absorbed this advice silently, going over the words in his head as Sirius knelt in front of the fireplace to warm his hands, balancing on his bare feet that sank into the black hearth rug underneath him. His dark, graying hair hung in his face, giving his features a solemn shadow as the firelight danced across them. I hadn't really done anything truly great...

Harry wondered if he would ever get the chance to do something great; if he would one day become as powerful and accomplished as Dumbledore.

Abruptly Sirius shook his head as if to clear it and said out of nowhere: "Have you seen Kreacher?"

Harry blinked but answered: "No...not since we first got here."

"Hmm..." Sirius shrugged and scratched his chin, the resentful shadow from before leaving his face. "With any luck he's crawled into

the attic and died, the wretched little mongrel, but I mustn't get my hopes up..."

Harry fought not to laugh at this statement, for he knew Hermione would not approve. He saw that Sirius was thinking of leaving him, so he jumped up and went over to his trunk, where he had been keeping the gift he bought for his godfather. "Here..."

Sirius watched Harry retrieve the gift and took it hesitantly. "What's this? For me, Harry?"

"Yeah. I think you need it. You can open it now if you want. I won't tell Mrs. Weasley." Harry grinned and Sirius ruffled his hair affectionately.

The former prisoner gave a small shudder upon sight of the very simple gift. His breath caught and he blinked back what Harry recognized as tears. "Harry...I don't know what to say..."

Harry didn't either. He could only imagine what his godfather's reaction would be to the shaving kit he had almost gotten instead.

"Well...it's got these leather handling gloves, see? I-I just thought with Buckbeak biting you all the time, you might..."

Sirius nodded quickly. "Right. Right. Good thinking. Aha! And here's a sturdy brush for when his feathers go all funny! He nibbles at the ones that stick out something awful, poor beast. Thank you, Harry..." he drew the boy into a tight, one-armed embrace and grinned crookedly upon releasing him. "I think I'll go and give him a nice grooming right now, as a matter of fact."

"Okay..."

Sirius muttered 'thank you again' and backed away out through the door. Harry thought he distinctly heard him sniff as he shut it behind him.

Christmas morning Harry awoke to a pile of presents at the foot of his bed.

Ron was already halfway through his when the boy sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Happy Christmas, mate, dig in..."

"Happy Christmas, Ron."

Harry reached for his glasses, put them on, and his vision focused almost immediately on the topmost parcel—it was from Angelina.

"Oh that came this morning," Ron explained, making a face at the homework planner Hermione had given him. "Tonks brought us our mail from the Burrow pretty early and she didn't wanna wake you yet."

Harry reached out for the neatly wrapped gift. The wrapping paper had little flying Quidditch players zooming in every direction on its waxy surface; Harry's heart gave an affectionate swoop as he stared at it for a moment. It was rectangular and light. Ron paused in tearing the paper from another of his own gifts, peering over at Harry expectantly. He opened the present carefully.

It was a box made of the same wood as his wand. He ran his fingers along it softly, a slow smile spreading across his lips. Upon opening it Harry saw that it contained a polished, black, leather wand holster. His initials were engraved in silver on one of the straps. He lifted it from its carved out place in the black velvet casing. "Wow..."

"Blimey that's brilliant!" Ron gasped enviously, his mouth dropping open.

There was a note, Harry noticed, tucked into the holster where his wand would go. He pulled it out and unrolled it.

For future duels...

And to keep your wand, which is an extension of yourself, safe.

-Love your Angel

Harry re-read the note several times before closing it again and tucking it gently back where he found it. He didn't care—whether this

was love he was feeling or not, it was strong. As he closed the box and sat it next to him on the bed, he wondered if her present had gotten to France yet. Surely it must have...or else why would she refer to herself as his Angel?

After they got through opening presents they went down to Christmas brunch in the kitchen. Harry had gotten a funny-looking painting from Dobby, an identical homework planner to Ron's from Hermione, and a miniature working model of a Firebolt from Tonks. Kreacher, who was still missing, got a present from Hermione. Ron got that pleased with himself look on his face again when he asked Hermione how she liked her present and she merely told him that the perfume he'd gotten her was strange. When his face fell she kissed him on the lips and added: "I like it. I think I'll wear it out today."

Lupin came by with Tonks and Moody and more present opening ensued. Harry thanked Tonks for hers and Lupin for his encyclopedia of dark magical creatures. Lupin and Sirius had a quiet but jovial conversation in the den, the two of them sipping from hot tea Mrs. Weasley had brewed. Harry couldn't help peaking in at them curiously a few times, and he saw them laugh together, their faces lit by the white light coming through the heavy curtains. He could almost picture his father sitting with them—his absence must've been palpable for the two men.

After they'd all eaten, Sirius played some more of the old records that Mundungus had brought and Harry heard a snippet of an ironic song "I Put a Spell on You" by someone called Nina Simone as they left for St. Mungo's to visit Mr. Weasley.

This second trip did not result in Harry being talked about in hushed conversation, as it had done last time, but they did make some rather interesting (and grim) discoveries. Gilderoy Lockhart, it seemed, was no closer to remembering who he was than the Ministry was to admitting that Harry was telling the truth about Voldemort's return. No one but Harry knew about Neville's parents, and seeing how the other boy handled his grandmother and having both of his parents out of their minds made Harry (only once in his whole life) feel glad that his own mother and father had at least escaped such a fate. Better to have them gone than to have to see them like that...

The others spoke about it the whole way back to the house, and Harry empathized with poor Neville—for he knew what it was like to be whispered about. He had to hand it to the kid, though. He looked them all in the eyes when his mother had given him the chew wrapper, daring any of them to say anything. They would not, of course—how could they? It was one of the most poignant things Harry had ever seen, the simple act of that boy's poor mother slipping a folded chew wrapper into his palm and whispering something she obviously considered a secret. And Neville's stoic "Thanks, Mum..." was enough to break your heart, Hermione had opined sadly as they were taking off their coats in Ron and Harry's bedroom.

"Well let's not go on about it," Harry had told them when they were heading down to dinner. "He's got enough to deal with. We shouldn't say anything at school about it either."

"You're right," Hermione agreed.

Another week passed, and Christmas decorations started undergoing strange attacks.

Harry took the fact that almost every bauble hanging from a dead house elf's nose had been knocked to the ground and smashed to mean that Kreacher had decided to come out of hiding. Sirius didn't seem to mind this; he ordered Kreacher to clean up after himself when he tore things down and as a result the decorations came down quite quickly and the house looked normal again without any of them having to lift a finger. The Master Black seized the record player Mundungus brought and horded it up to Buckbeak's room before Kreacher could get his sneaky little hands on it, along with all the records. Every now and then when Harry was in the halls upstairs he could hear faint, beautifully sad music drifting down to him from the third floor. Sirius really liked Patsy Cline's record, as well as the Nina Simone one. There was another one he played a lot, too, though Harry had to ask Hermione who it was. She snuck up to the second floor landing with him and craned her ears to hear for almost an entire song. It was a melodic voice crooning: "...at last...my love has come along..." accompanied by violins that made Harry's heart do that funny swoop again. After it was over, Hermione turned to him smiling and informed him that it was one of her mother's favorite singers, Etta

James. Harry wondered if his own mother would like music like this. Who wouldn't, really? Besides Ron and the twins who maintained, despite the occasions when Harry would catch them humming the melody to themselves quietly, that it was girly music.

Harry heard that one song in particular several times and he could not help thinking of Angelina when the soulful words drifted out to him from Buckbeak's closed room at night: "...oh you smiled...you smiled, and then the spell was cast...and here we are in heaven...for you are mine at last..." He could also not help noticing that as the days progressed, and the last of the Christmas decorations had gone, that Sirius was becoming more and more like his old sullen self, and was retreating to Buckbeak's room with the grooming kit and record player often.

"He's getting sad again now Christmas is over and we're closer and closer to the end of break," Harry confided to Ginny one evening as they were playing wizard chess in the bedroom. She took yet another of his pawns with her bishop. The kill was brutal. Harry winced and brushed away the broken pieces. "I want to talk to him a bit more, but it's hard to know how to approach him."

"Why don't you just ask him what's wrong?"

He thought that it wasn't so easy as that, especially not after he had seen the raw emotion in the man on Christmas Eve. He didn't say this aloud, however.

More days passed, and it seemed as if Harry and Ginny were in the exact same game moment as before, because he watched her bishop take his pawn again like *deja vous* and then Mrs. Black started screaming her head off downstairs.

They didn't pay much attention, for they had gotten used to her terrible wailing as announcement for members of the Order who swept in and out on a regular basis. Fred and George, who were lounging on Ron's bed reading Muggle comics, immediately went for the Extendable Ears they kept ready in their pockets at all times. Ron came upstairs then and closed the door behind him, an irritated look

on his face. "It's Snape," he told them flatly. "Says he's here for you, Harry."

Harry looked up from the chess set and scowled. "Me? He wants to see...why?"

After a second of thinking about it, Harry feared that somehow Malfoy had gotten it in his head that playbook be damned—he was going to turn Harry in for challenging him to a duel. He felt almost certain that he was walking to his doom as he stood up on shaky legs and crossed the room towards Ron and the door.

"You reckon Malfoy opened his mouth?" his best friend asked quietly, his face going pale. "You think Snape's come to expel you?"

Harry could only shrug, feeling white hot chills spread over him at the thought of it. "Go on, Harry," Fred said, discarding his comic book and standing up. He reached in his pocket and dug out the tangle of fleshy colored string he and his brother had dubbed Extendable Ears. "We'll be ready to hex him good if he tries to whip you or anything."

"And get yourselves expelled, too?" Ginny asked sarcastically. The twins shrugged.

Harry swallowed and stepped out into the hall, where he could see as he peered over the banister the tops of Sirius's head and Snape's greasy mop. He steeled himself against his fate and walked downstairs to meet them.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Caught

“Get up, Potter.”

Harry was shaking slightly, and his knees were aching from hitting the floor so hard, but he slowly got to his feet as the Potions Master instructed. Severus Snape was standing across the desk from him, his dark eyes narrowed, his wand held at his side. Harry thought that he never hated Snape more in all his years of being at Hogwarts. If only for what he had just seen in Harry’s mind...

“Who did the dog belong to?” Snape asked quietly, referring to the snippet of memory he had just seen of Harry being chased by the vicious bulldog Ripper up a tree, all while Dudley and his Uncle Vernon laughed their plump faces red.

Harry’s jaw was like a vise. “My Aunt Marge...”

There was a pause in which the boy and the man were silent and their dislike for one another was palpable.

“You cried out very loudly. I suggest,” uttered Snape silkily, “that you spend less time shouting and more time closing your mind. You are allowing me access to these memories too easily. You are not trying, Potter.”

“I am trying.” Harry said through clenched teeth.

“Not nearly hard enough!” the professor snapped, scowling and reaching over to rub the red welt that was forming on the back of his wand hand. “Did you intend to produce a Stinging Hex?”

Harry blinked, his scar beginning to throb tightly. “I’m not sure. No.”

The wizard raised an eyebrow at the boy. “Have you ever used one before?”

“Er...no.” He tried not to think of Malfoy dropping to his knees on the Quidditch pitch, holding his hands to his eyes and moaning.

Ever since he had been informed in Sirius' kitchen at Grimmauld Place that he was to take Occlumency lessons with Snape this term, Harry had been dreading it, not only because there was nothing he could think of that could be more miserable than having to be in Snape's company alone every Monday and Wednesday for perhaps the rest of the year. The relief he'd felt at discovering that the Potions Master had not come to Grimmauld Place to expel him was short-lived, for the second Snape explained to him what exactly they would be doing, his heart gave a shudder and he knew he was doomed. He could only imagine the repercussions if Snape stumbled upon the memories Harry had of the duel. Hermione had tried to make him feel better by insisting that the lessons were meant for him to learn to protect his mind from penetration, but Harry could not help dwelling on the penetration part. And, as he had feared, here he was: Snape was pulling images and memories from Harry's head as easily as if he had pulled the cork out of a tub full of water—they drained out of him so fast and so vividly that it was wholly overwhelming and he couldn't summon the proper concentration to defend himself.

Snape stared at Harry for a moment and then pulled his crisp white cuff down so that it partially covered the welt on his hand.

"A hastily thrown hex suggests to me that you acted more out of blind anger that I was seeing those things than anything else. This is not what we want. We want: willful—closing—of—the—mind." Harry hated it when Snape spoke to him as if he were an idiot, which was often. He understood what the objective was, but Snape wasn't showing him how to reach said goal. He spoke this aloud. "I was told you showed a promising aptitude for resisting the Imperius Curse last year, Potter," the Potions Master sneered. "The same principles apply, to an extent. You will resist me the way you resisted that curse. Make yourself ready, now."

Harry tried to push everything incriminating to the back of his mind; tried to block it out by mentally draping it with a black shroud. He barely had a chance to, though, because Snape had raised his wand and said clearly: "One—two—three—Legilimens!"

For the third time, Harry saw the small office they were standing in wash away and all of a sudden a huge black dragon was whipping its

tail at him, puncturing his flesh with its long thorns...his mother was smiling serenely at him through an enchanted mirror...Sirius was aiming his wand viciously at Wormtail in the Shrieking Shack...Angelina was touching his hand, moving it down the length of her curved body, her eyes burning...

No, Harry thought, his whole body stiffening as this memory drew nearer. You're not watching that--it's private, you can't see it! But Angelina was moving his hand still lower, and then under her skirt...

"STOP IT!"

Harry heard glass shattering and Snape's growl of surprise. He had fallen over backwards to the floor, but when his vision came back again he looked up to see Snape eyeing him angrily from his position slightly to the left of where he had been standing before. There was a glistening, slimy substance running down his shoulder. Harry could see now that several jars sitting on the shelves behind Snape's desk had burst open, and the Potions Master had moved out of the way just in time to narrowly avoid being submerged in the nasty-looking stuff they contained.

"I don't recall 'stop it' being the incantation for the Reductor Curse, Potter..." Snape said hotly. He Scourgified the slimy mess from his robes and repaired the broken jars. "If mastering Occlumency were not still beyond you, I would suggest that you learn how to control your emotional magic..."

Harry hadn't realized he'd broken the jars simply by becoming angry at Snape for seeing his memory of Angelina, but he wasn't surprised—he had done things like that before. A fleeting image of Dudley being trapped inside a snake enclosure at the zoo came to mind. He did not feel the slightest bit of remorse for breaking the jars—in fact he was very glad he had done it. He had a bad feeling that after Angelina would've come Draco and himself on the Quidditch pitch if Snape had dug any further.

"Get up." Snape ordered, and Harry got to his feet once again. "We will try again, and this time I want you to empty yourself of that anger I can see clearly etched into your insolent little face." Harry opened

his mouth, his nostrils flaring defiantly, but Snape cut him off. “I do not care what you do alone with Miss Johnson, Potter. It may come as a shock to you, but I do not spend one second of my day wondering how the two of you manage to pass the time together, is that clear?”

Harry wanted so much to set the greasy git’s robes on fire, but he clamped his mouth shut and said nothing. Again he used the time in which Snape raised his wand to try and push back any memories that would end up with him back at Privet Drive five months early. Snape told him to empty himself of emotion, but it was no use. He was angry and embarrassed. All the things that loathsome, spiteful, sneering bully of a professor had seen...

“Legilimens!”

....a hundred Dementors were closing in on him as he shook Sirius’ unconscious form on the bank of the dark lake...he was stepping on Pavarti Patil’s foot as they danced at the Yule Ball...Uncle Vernon was hammering the letter box shut and Dudley was snickering gleefully on the stairs while Harry felt hot tears sting his eyes...Cedric—Cedric’s eyes zapping to large hollow pools of nothingness behind a flash of green light...No! Harry’s mind screamed for the second time. No, please, not that! I—don’t—want—to see—that! Cedric was dead, staring up at Harry with those horribly blank eyes and the crowd at the maze task was swelling around them....

“NO! No, no, no, no!”

He was on his knees again, whimpering, holding his head in his hands. Harry’s scar throbbed painfully and his mind felt stretched like taffy; he was shaking all over as if he really had just watched Cedric die for the second time.

“Get up!” Snape barked. “Get up, Potter! You are not trying! I have seen these things as easily as if they were my own memories; that is unacceptable! Make an effort, you silly boy! In the hands of the Dark Lord, memories like that of Cedric Diggory’s death can be used as weapons against you! Get up, now!”

Harry leapt to his feet, his wand hand tightening until his knuckles hurt. "I am trying! Do you think I want you to see those things?"

"You are arrogantly displaying your contempt for me like a badge, Potter; that is foolish. And fools wear their hearts on their sleeves, wallow in sad memories, and allow themselves to be provoked this easily. Weak people, in other words, become swift prey for the Dark Lord."

"I am not weak! You may think I'm a fool, but I fought Volde--!"

"I told you, do not say the Dark Lord's name! Now again! Legilimens..."

....Harry was now running down a long corridor with Mr. Weasley...they were late for his hearing and they hurried along...drawing nearer to a familiar-looking black door...but instead of walking through it as Harry so wanted them to, they turned sharply and sprinted down a set of stone steps...

"THAT'S IT! I'VE FOUND IT! I KNOW WHERE--!"

For pity's sake, he was on all fours again in Snape's office and the feeling of triumph was draining out of him quickly. Snape stood regarding him with a look of slight surprise, and Harry understood that upon hearing what he'd been shouting, the professor had lifted the spell. He got shakily to his feet, a thick knot of purpose developing in his throat. "What did you mean by that, Potter?" He was watching Harry very intently.

Harry panted, licking his lips. "I've just realized..."

"Realized what?" Snape asked sharply, his tone of voice like the one he used when he suspected Harry had said something disrespectful under his breath.

Harry blinked at the man, wondering if he should divulge what had just dawned on him: that the place he had been dreaming about for months—the door he had been racing towards and desperately trying

to open, rested in a real location. And Harry knew exactly where it was, now.

He took a deep breath, swallowed down the lump in his throat, and asked flatly: "What's in the Department of Mysteries?"

Escaping Snape's office with his academic standing at Hogwarts still in tact, Harry went straight for the library where he knew Ron and Hermione were plowing through Umbridge's tedious D.A.D.A. homework.

He felt wobbly on his feet, and his knees still hurt from hitting the floor so many times, but he walked with purpose and hardly stopped to speak to any of the various D.A. members who tried to corner him on the way. They wanted to know when the next meeting would be, despite their having only been back from Christmas break for a day.

Harry's head felt as if his brain had swollen several sizes too big for his skull; it throbbed painfully and his scar was stinging. When he passed a trophy case in the hall near where the library was, he caught sight of his reflection and noticed that he looked terrible. He was pale and sweat was glistening slightly on the edges of his hairline under the glow from the torches lining the hall.

Hermione immediately asked him how his first lesson with Snape went when he found them at a table near a window and sat down opposite them. "It went very badly, but never mind that..." and he told them what he had deduced upon Snape's last Legilimens spell.

They talked about this discovery in hushed voices the rest of the time they were in the library.

Ron told Harry that his father called the people who worked in the Department of Mysteries "Unspeakables" because no one knew what exactly they did there. It was a top secret branch of the Ministry, and only those who worked directly under Fudge had any real idea what went on in that department. They all agreed that whatever weapon the Order feared Voldemort might get his hands on was probably kept

there, in some form or fashion. And Harry had been dreaming about it for months...

"So I take it since you're still with us that Snape didn't see anything about the duel?" Ron asked on their way back to Gryffindor Tower.

Harry shook his head, feeling slightly feverish. "No...but I fully expect him to on our next lesson. I might as well start packing my things, now."

"Did Snape give you anything to do to prepare for the next one?" Hermione asked conscientiously, frowning a little as she watched Harry stumble over his dragging feet. "Like mediation or...?"

"He said to empty myself of emotion every night before I go to bed, and to master myself, whatever that means."

"I means stop getting angry so quickly," Hermione said at once, but upon receiving his dirty look she added: "I was only saying..."

"Has anyone seen Angelina?" Harry asked, a bit annoyed, as they stepped through the portrait hole.

The first thought Harry had when he stepped off the Knight Bus the morning before was that he could not wait to see Angelina. Granted—there were many things that he was not looking forward to at all, Snape's Occlumency lesson being the first and a host of others following: seeing Malfoy again, placing himself once again under Delores Umbridge's watchful eye, and mountains of homework as exam time drew nearer among them. No Quidditch...

Also there was the fact that he was leaving Sirius behind again to poke about Grimmauld Place with no one but Kreacher and Buckbeak and those gloomy records for company. Sirius had given him something right before he stepped out of the house; a poorly wrapped parcel that he shoved hastily into the boy's hands before Mrs. Weasley noticed. "I want you to keep this safe, Harry."

Harry had frowned at the parcel and then looked curiously up into his godfather's face. "What is it, Sirius?"

"Shh, don't let Molly see. Use it to let me know if Snape abuses you in any way during those lessons, understand?"

"Okay..." But Harry knew he wouldn't—the argument between the two wizards that occurred in the kitchen the night before was obviously still fresh in Sirius' mind, judging from the look of bitter resentment in his dark eyes. Snape had accused Sirius, in so many words, of being a coward who purposefully risked getting himself spotted so that he wouldn't have to lift a finger to do anything important for the Order. Harry did not want to be the reason for Sirius' reckless behavior on any account, no matter what Snape did.

Sirius had given him something else, too. "It's your present. Sorry it's so late; I was trying to finish it before you all had to leave. It's not much, but..."

And he handed Harry a wooden stag that he had carved himself. Apparently he had been up to more than moping when he'd been locked away in Buckbeak's room. "Wow, Sirius. You made this?"

The older man shrugged and fingered the top of the stag's head, avoiding Harry's gaze. "Yeah, well...I-I wanted you to have something meaningful, you know. Something personal that didn't come from a shop. I asked Molly to get the wood and tools for me, but...d-do you like it?"

Harry smiled as his godfather finally met his eyes. "I love it. Thank you."

Harry had the overwhelming urge to say more—to tell Sirius not to worry about Snape; that he was, in Harry's eyes, a descent and brave wizard with more courage in his little finger than Snape had in his whole rotten body. He wanted to tell Sirius that he loved him, and that he'd had the best time possible at Grimmauld Place this Christmas—that he would come back, and they could carve wooden animals everyday if he wanted to. Just so long as he knew that he was not useless.

But there was no time; Tonks swept him up and shooed him out, and Harry had that feeling again as he parted ways with his godfather—the feeling he'd gotten as they lay side by side on his bed on Christmas Eve night. The here and now being what it was, and Sirius was no longer looking at him, speaking to him, giving his shoulder a paternal squeeze. He was now in the dark of his family's house, now disappearing as the unplottable building squeezed itself to nothingness between numbers 11 and 13.

Harry clutched the little wooden stag protectively the whole way back on the Knight Bus, feeling as if he were clutching at Sirius somehow. "Take care of yourself, Harry..." he had whispered gravely. "And don't hesitate to call on me if you need anything—anything at all."

For some reason Harry could not stop thinking about those words. They were standard enough—Sirius was worried about Snape mistreating him, but still...they weighed on him.

Hermione shrugged her shoulders in answer to Harry's question as they set their things down at a table in the crowded and rowdy common room. Fred and George were at it again—this time they were demonstrating Headless Hats. "No, no I don't think she's arrived yet, Harry."

He had not seen Angelina at all since arriving back from Grimmauld Place. Seventh years were allowed an extra day for break if so requested, which was no doubt how Fred and George found the time to put the finishing touches on their latest product. Harry had forgotten this, though, and it disheartened him a great deal to learn from Katie Bell that Angelina's parents had requested the extra day when they planned the trip to Cannes back at the beginning of the first term. He had hoped that she might be back before dinner, but when he didn't see her his heart sank. There had been no time to check the common room for her arrival after that; he had to go to the dungeons to meet Snape.

Now Harry looked around the room, trying to search her out, but he didn't find her and he had to close his eyes as he got a hot stab of pain in his scar. Ron saw Harry wince and frowned, midway through opening his Potions book. "You all right, mate?"

"No...I don't like Occlumency much..." Harry replied quietly, his eyes still closed.

"Well having Snape pawing at my brain over and over again would probably make me a bit shaky, too..." Ron muttered empathetically.

Hermione reached over and touched Harry's arm gently. "You don't look well, Harry. Perhaps you should go and lie down?"

Harry nodded, sliding his eyes open very slowly. "Yeah, I don't think I can do this tonight," he agreed, referring to the Potions homework he had been about to try and look at.

"Ooh, put it in your homework planner!" she said encouragingly, and Harry made a half-hearted scribble in the thing while it sang at him that he shouldn't leave it till later if he didn't want to be a second-rater. If it weren't for her feelings, he thought as he gathered his things and trudged up the stairs to the boys' dorms, I would chuck that thing in the fireplace...

Harry had been on the verge of being more than annoyed with Angelina's parents for keeping her away from him as he ascended the cool, quiet steps to his room. He stepped inside, threw his school bag on the floor next to the furnace, and then his world tipped violently.

Harry felt an invisible blade slice right through his scar; the pain was so unbearable that he lost all conscious thought for a moment. There was nothing about the reality he had been in seconds before that remained—not the time of day, where he was, or even who he was—only relentless, horrible pain. And then there was mad, cold laughter ringing in his brain, echoing loudly and rippling through him as he suddenly felt the wonderful surge of triumph seize him. He was happy! Happier than he had been in a very long time. He felt truly pleased; this wonderful thing had happened and it made him almost giddy to know that soon, very soon (especially with this new development) he would have what he had been trying to get his hands on for so long...

"Harry? Harry, stop it, it's me!" He felt a hard slap across the face. The laughter that had been echoing wildly in his head now stopped abruptly and he realized as he slipped out of this horrible vision that it had been coming out of his own mouth. He had been rolling around on his back, and he stopped that too, his eyes focusing on Angelina's concerned face hovering over him. "I'm sorry I slapped you..." she said in a small voice. "Harry what happened to you?"

"He's really happy." Harry panted, allowing her to pull him to his feet. "Happier than he's been in years..."

Angelina looked as if she didn't understand, and then it dawned on her and she gasped, "You-Know-Who?"

Harry nodded shakily, suddenly feeling sick to his stomach. "Something's happened. Something he's been hoping for." It unnerved him just saying it, and he had to sit down. Angelina helped him to his bed where she sat next to him and rubbed his back.

Ron came hurrying in just then, followed closely by Hermione. They had apparently decided to abandon their studies to take a few moments to chat with Harry and Angelina, but now both looked alarmed. "What happened?"

Harry's head felt heavy; too heavy. "Voldemort..." he uttered, causing Ron and Angelina to wince. "I just got—he's happy about something."

Hermione and Ron exchanged looks. "What's he so happy about?" Ron asked, swallowing. He sat with Hermione on the edge of his own bed. "Did he attack someone else?"

Harry shook his head, though it hurt him to do so. His brain felt loose, like it was rolling around in his skull, hitting the sides when he moved. It was a very unpleasant feeling. Angelina rubbed his back still, and he suddenly became aware that she was there with him. "Angelina..." he leaned into her and closed his eyes, feeling sick but relieved. He inhaled. Her hair smelled like crisp wind. She must've just gotten in seconds after he'd given up looking for her and gone upstairs. "You're back."

"What's going on, Harry?" she asked him, concern clear in her voice.

"Occlumency..." Harry muttered, leaning over and laying his head in her lap. Seconds later he felt her cool fingers in his hair, massaging his head gently, "...with Snape."

Angelina looked to Hermione as Harry fell into slumberous silence on her lap. "Occlu--what?"

"It's the study of protecting the mind from intrusion," Hermione informed, bringing her legs up and crossing them on Ron's bed. She reached over and started absentmindedly playing with Ron's hand as she explained to Angelina that because Harry could sometimes feel Voldemort's emotions, he was to study Occlumency with Snape this term.

"Oh wait..." the seventh year frowned, still stroking Harry's jet black hair. "I think I've read about that--so they've finally decided to do something about this?" Angelina asked. "He told me about it a while ago and I always wanted him to go to Dumbledore. But Snape? He hates Harry, from what I've heard and seen—why is he teaching Harry this stuff?"

"Well...it's a little more complicated than you think, Angelina." Hermione gave Harry, who was now fast asleep, a beleaguered look before continuing. "You see...well you and Harry have become very close, now, so I don't feel bad telling you this." She took a deep breath. "Harry had a dream about Voldemort—Ron, please—attacking Mr. Weasley through his pet snake, and that's why everyone knew so quickly. Except it wasn't just a dream or a vision. Harry said he felt like he was inside the snake, a-and well you can see how that is cause for concern." She went on explaining some of their theories on why this was happening to Harry, and about Snape informing the boy personally that he would be mentoring him in Occlumency.

Angelina listened, feeling more and more worried for Harry by the second. She had been informed by Professor McGonagall about Mr. Weasley's attack that following morning when she woke to discover that all of the Weasley siblings plus Harry had gone. Hermione

begged off skiing with her parents, but Angelina could not very well ditch going to France. She had wanted to send an owl to the Burrow, but the professor informed her that it would do no good—they weren't staying there. She would not, however, divulge their alternative location and suggested that Angelina send something to St. Mungo's instead. The note was short, simply saying that she hoped everything would be all right, but she didn't hear back from anyone and as a result she spent the days leading up to Christmas preoccupied and glum.

Then her mother brought her the parcel that contained the present from Harry. Her spirits were lifted considerably when she unwrapped the simple, leather-bound journal with the word "Angel" engraved in gold. She had started writing in it immediately, deciding to treat it more like a diary than anything else. She already had a new playbook, and it was just a shabby notebook that Fred had bewitched to burn the fingers of any intruders. She spent the days leading up to her return to Hogwarts writing her thoughts in her new journal when she wasn't sight-seeing with her parents. They stayed at a gorgeous estate just outside the city that her great-uncle owned and one of Angelina's favorite activities was to watch the snow fall lightly over the grounds. The majority of her entries, one needn't have to guess, concerned Harry.

There was no return address on the parcel, so Angelina hoped that he had gotten her present that she sent to the Burrow earlier. Looking now, she could see the rectangular wooden box sitting on his nightstand.

He was snoring faintly in her lap. Angelina stroked his hair, Hermione having finished the tale, thinking. "If these lessons are to protect him from visions like that, then what was this all about? How come he knows that You-Know-Who is happy right now?"

"She has a point," Ron said as they both looked to Hermione again.

"I-I don't know..." the girl shrugged, truly at a loss. "I can only think that maybe Harry's finding the whole process very weakening right now, and it was only his first lessons after all. Maybe it just takes a while to...build a resistance."

There was a pause in which they all regarded Harry silently.

Neville came in a second later, saw them all sitting there, and avoided looking at them as he crossed to the furnace to gather his towel before turning and leaving the room, probably headed for the boys' showers. Angelina thought she saw Ron and Hermione exchange looks again. Sighing, she gave Harry's hair one last gentle stroke before attempting to shift her weight so that she could stand. "I guess I should go unpack."

"Hrrmmm....don't go..." he mumbled sleepily, wrapping his arms around her waist to pull her gently back down again.

"Or not." Angelina resumed her position and Harry absentmindedly rubbed his cheek against her legs, his eyes still closed. A second later his rhythmic breathing started up again and she knew he was asleep. Angelina decided to ask the question she'd been wondering about the whole break: "Where were you guys?"

"Um..." Ron started, looking at the floor. "We stayed, eh...with a friend of the family."

Angelina raised an eyebrow at Hermione's forbidding look to the ginger-haired boy. "What friend? Why couldn't I just send my owl there? McGonagall wouldn't tell me the name or address..."

Hermione made a sound like she wanted to say but knew she couldn't. "It's-it's, well, it's kind of complicated, Angelina." The fifth year girl attempted.

"I'm listening." Angelina could not escape the feeling that they were hiding something from her.

"Maybe we should tell her?" Ron spoke, shrugging.

Hermione's inner struggle grew steadily in her features. "Did you ask Fred or George?"

"No. I was saying hello when I heard Harry up here. What else is going on, Hermione?"

"Let's just say..." Hermione began carefully. "That the D.A. is more like a kid-version of the real defense against Voldemort's followers. One much more official that does a lot more than just have meetings to practice their spell work." Ron shuddered at the mention of Voldemort, but said nothing.

"Okay..."

"And let's just say that we know people who are members of this other defense. We stayed at their headquarters. With someone who's close to Harry. Sort of a relative, but not by blood." She looked as if that would be the only bit of information Angelina could get out of her.

"Right. Well...is this organization...does it have Aurors in it?"

"Some, yeah." Ron piped up, adjusting himself so that he was more comfortable on the bed. Hermione still held his hand.

"Anyone I would know? My granddad used to be an Auror."

"Um...well I don't know," replied Hermione.

"You mean you're not going to tell me people's names."

"Try to understand, Angelina, it's not that we don't trust you." Hermione offered quickly. "But..." and she gestured to Harry, who was still asleep in Angelina's lap. There was another pause, in which Angelina thought it sounded like Hermione was worried that speaking of this "other defense" organization in front of the boy might prove dangerous at that particular moment in time.

"I think I understand, then."

"Well...we've got studying to do." Hermione stretched and stood up, motioning for Ron to follow her.

"Thanks for the note," Ron said, referring to the note she'd sent to St. Mungo's. "Dad didn't remember who you were at first, but George reminded him of that summer you spent with us." He smiled apologetically and stood up with Hermione.

"I'm glad he's okay."

"See you later." Ron followed Hermione out of the room, leaving Angelina and Harry alone.

She sat there for a moment, watching him sleep. She was so glad to be back with him. She hadn't realized she missed him so much until she was being dropped off by the Knight Bus in front of the castle gates. The January air was still chilly and crisp; her breath came out in small, impatient puffs as she managed her trunk on the short walk up a gravelly incline until she came to the gate, where Hagrid was waiting for students coming back late. As soon as she saw him, she asked, "Hagrid, have you seen Harry?"

And he frowned as he swung the gate open (a little too slowly she thought) for her. "Sure, he's up'the Tower, I guess. Or he should be by now."

She thanked him as he helped her carry her trunk up to the castle entrance and left it in the hall where the house elves usually took care of luggage. She took the stairs two at a time, breathing heavily when she reached the Tower. She was only thinking of his sloppy raven hair, boyish grin and crimson cheeks. Of course, time would be spent on Fred and George to make sure everything was okay with their dad, but really Angelina's first priority was to get to Harry so that she could listen to his maturing tenor voice sound out her name.

Angelina had spent her time thinking about her relationship with Harry very carefully during break.

She had not told her parents about Malfoy's attack. She didn't think it necessary. The more she thought about it, the more she realized that she did not feel completely violated. Malfoy was a stupid boy who fancied himself more powerful (more capable) than he really was, and

whatever he thought he could do, he obviously did not have the belly for it.

She realized that she was glad she had Harry. She had foolishly been pawing at a memory that had been, for all intents and purposes, partially erased instead of taking action against Malfoy the way Harry rightly wanted to. He defended her, risked expulsion for her, and put himself up against physical harm when he really didn't have to. She thought at first that it was a petty boy's game, their fighting, but Angelina soon came to the conclusion that it was much more than that. Whatever unspoken hatred Malfoy and Harry had for each other, it was compounded by the former's attempt to hurt her.

Dean came in, already taking off his school jumper. He spotted her and stopped as it was half-way up over his torso. "Oh—hey, Angelina. Should I...?"

"Oh, no, sorry. He just fell asleep and I can't really get him to move."

Dean chuckled and rolled his jumper down again. "I see." She watched him cross the room and hop onto his bed. "So how was your Christmas? Good haul this year?"

"Yeah. Pretty good. Cannes is a really cool town. You?"

He shrugged and shoved off his shoes. "Not bad. Parents were a bit smothery, what with everything that's going on. That murderer Sirius Black still being on the loose, and..." he lowered his voice, glancing at Harry. "And they're part of the few who believe Harry about You-Know-Who. They talked about it a lot, they did." He shook his head at her irritably. "They wouldn't stop asking me questions about Harry. 'What's he like?', 'Does he ever talk about what happened last year?' blah, blah, blah..."

"And what do you tell them?"

"I just tell them to mind their own business, in a polite fashion. My dad understands. Mum is a little upset with me for not telling her everything she wants to know." Dean yawned and scooted back further onto the bed. "But, honestly, that's why Harry is so frustrated

all the time—people talking about him and everything. Ginny told me it gets to him, and I don't blame him really. If it were me I don't think I would even want to come back to Hogwarts year after year..."

Dean soon fell asleep, still talking about Ginny. Angelina listened to him complain faintly that Ron was being a prat until he was out. She managed to shift her weight, and soon was lying next to Harry on the bed. They curled up together, spooning each other. Harry's body was as solid as a rock; he drew in slow, heavy breaths that warmed her hair and the back of her neck. His arms remained around her, holding her close. He must be so tired, she thought. Is this Occlumency thing going to make him like this every time?

She didn't sleep.

She thought about all the information she'd just received, and about the things she'd been mulling over for weeks. Angelina didn't know everything there was to know about him, or this "relative" Hermione spoke of, or his dreams about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. She didn't know everything, but Angelina knew for certain that she was involved now because she was his and that meant the time for keeping things from each other was over.

She knew this the moment she opened her present and the note he'd written calling her his Angel.

She was going to ask him to tell her about these things, and in exchange she was going to tell him how she truly felt, even if that meant admitting that she had been wrong all along about Malfoy.

A few hours passed, and eventually Seamus and Neville came up to bed. Neither of them made a big deal of her presence. They inclined their heads in greeting; well, Seamus looked as if he did, but Angelina couldn't really tell because his head was missing—his wallet was probably a couple of Galleons light as well; and perhaps kept more clothes on than they would have normally when they went to bed. Soon after that Ron came up, too.

Angelina was falling asleep when she felt Harry's grip tighten on her and he started muttering into her hair. "Sirius..."

Had he just said...? Angelina tensed and tried to turn around, but his grip on her was firm. "Harry?" she whispered.

"Don't." His voice was muffled by her hair. "He's just...don't listen..."

"Harry, you're dreaming."

"Sirius, no. Snape's just trying to...no...put your wand away!" He jerked awake suddenly, causing her to gasp. Harry blinked and sat up, looking all around him. After a moment in which he must have been figuring out where exactly he was, he sighed heavily and settled down again, reaching up to rub his scar.

"Harry? Are you okay?"

Harry turned to her, seemingly just noticing that she was there. "Angelina!" he whispered, relieved. "How long have you...? When did I fall asleep?"

"Hours ago. I'd just gotten back when you--"

"I had that feeling from Voldemort." He finished for her solemnly. Angelina nodded, unable to help herself from studying him carefully. "Did you..." he swallowed, purposefully looking at her neck rather than into her eyes. "Did you hear me...laughing like that?"

She nodded. "It scared me."

"I'm sorry."

"Hermione said you're taking Occlumency with Professor Snape this term."

"Yeah. To help the dreams and feelings stop." He groaned and closed his eyes, again rubbing his face against her; this time his forehead against her neck. "It's like having someone scrape everything in my brain out with a spoon."

"I don't like the sound of that."

He shrugged tiredly. “Dumbledore wants me to do it.”

“Who is Sirius?” Angelina asked suddenly, and he opened his eyes.

“What?”

“You said ‘Sirius’ a minute ago when you were still asleep. Who is that? Not...” she paused, and he could feel it coming. In the second it took for her to form the words, Harry knew what she was going to ask and he decided that he would tell her. He didn’t know how she would react, but he cared about her enough to be honest with her. Besides...Sirius himself had more or less given Harry his blessing. It sounded to him as though the man looked forward to meeting Angelina eventually. Harry knew he wanted the same. “Not Sirius Black?”

“Yes, Sirius Black.”

“The murderer?”

“He is not a murderer, he’s my godfather. He was framed by someone he thought was his best friend. Someone who sold my parents out to Voldemort.” Harry said this in one breath, very frankly, still leaning his forehead against her.

He could feel her heartbeat, which was pounding out a fast, fluttery rhythm. “Oh...” was all she said. “But...is that where you were staying over break, then?” she asked after a moment. “Hermione said you stayed with a ‘relative’.”

“She did?” he smiled for some reason. “Yeah.”

“And is he part of the organization?”

Harry looked up at her, now. “What organization?”

“Hermione said...” she trailed off and his smile widened wearily.

It seemed that Hermione was doing all of Harry's confessing for him. "The Order of the Phoenix. He's a member. It's been around since before my parents were killed, when Voldemort was at his most powerful. They were a part of it, too. Sirius was my dad's best friend."

In a whisper that was barely audible except between the two of them, Harry explained to Angelina about the Order, and about how he learned that Sirius was his godfather. He told her about Wormtail, and Remus Lupin and the Marauders. He told her everything that had happened over Christmas break, including what he'd just been dreaming about—Snape and Sirius' row in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. She listened, and when he was finished he waited for her response. She studied him for a moment, then leaned forward and kissed him softly on the lips. The nerve endings all over his body tingled in unison and before she could pull away again he kissed her several more times quickly.

"I missed you, Angel..." he found himself saying against her mouth.

"I missed you too." She let him pull her closer. "I loved my gift. Thank you."

When his lips peeled away from hers the last time, he asked, "So you don't think I'm a nutter who has dreams about giant snakes and hangs out with convicted murderers?"

"No. I just hope that these lessons you're having with Snape work. And...I'm scared that whatever You-Know-Who is happy about has something to do with you."

Harry nodded, his own fear about that weighing in on him.

"Me too..."

Giving up on any notion to go to her own room, Angelina simply peeled off her clothes and slid under the covers with him, wearing nothing but her underwear. It was very hard for them to keep their hands off of each other. At one point they had to freeze where they were because Neville woke and actually got up, presumably to go

and relieve himself in the lavatory, but upon sight of them he hiccupped in embarrassment and scurried back into bed.

Harry and Angelina laughed silently at this for several minutes, his face in her neck, still fingering the clasp on her bra. Not wanting to risk anymore interruption, they decided to let it rest for the night, and Harry simply settled himself between her legs, where he fell asleep but did not dream. Angelina stroked his hair until she too fell into unconsciousness.

The next morning, Harry woke to find Angelina had gone.

He soon found her again, however, when he and Ron went down to the Great Hall for breakfast. Fred and George were nowhere to be seen, and Harry knew they were probably sleeping late as a result of staying up all night to sell their Headless Hats. No doubt they'd made a fortune and probably counted it all before they went to bed.

Harry was just sliding onto the bench next to Angelina when Hermione, who had just unrolled her Daily Prophet, made a flabbergasted noise. Ron was in the middle of lifting a spoonful of cereal to his mouth and he paused, frowning at her. Several people looked in their direction. Harry turned to regard his friend curiously.

"What?" he and Ron asked in unison.

Hermione looked at them all gravely and spread the paper out on the table. Ginny was just sitting down next to Ron, and was attempting to say hello to everyone but they were all staring at the front page of the paper in stunned silence. Her eyes settled on the headline as well. "That can't be possible," she said hoarsely.

They were staring at the black-and-white photographs of ten people, all of whom were Death Eaters, and all of whom had just escaped Azkaban Prison. Each picture held the face of some sinister wizard, sneering or yelling silently or thrashing about in the hands of their captors. Underneath the pictures were the names of the escapees, with a short explanation of their crimes. Among such crimes were murder, leaking information from the Ministry, and various other dark deeds. But there was one picture that Harry's eyes found

immediately; the last one, of a witch that he had seen before. The witch was not only familiar in the sense that Harry knew he had seen her picture somewhere before, but also in the sense that her features were of a certain kind...he could tell just by looking at her that she had once been very beautiful, but years in Azkaban had taken away most of that beauty. Now her once sleek raven hair was unkempt and graying in some places. Now her heavily-lidded eyes were wild and shining, not deep and seductive as they had been in the picture he had seen. Under the mugshot, he read her name and crime, unconsciously mouthing the words silently: "Bellatrix Black-Lestrange, convicted of the torture and permanent incapacitation of Frank and Alice Longbottom."

Harry knew now where he had seen this woman before. She was a Black family member, and her picture had been hidden in Kreacher's little hole in the furnace closet where Hermione had left his present. Also...yes, it was coming back to him, now. He had seen her in the trial room in Dumbledore's pensieve. He felt a cold stab of dread seize him as he tore his gaze from her image, which was staring back at him smugly, to read the headline above.

MASS BREAKOUT AT AZKABAN PRISON

MINISTRY FEARS BLACK IS "RALLYING POINT" FOR FORMER DEATH EATERS

"There you have it, Harry," Hermione was saying to him as he stared at the words until they blurred together. "I'm willing to bet this is why Voldemort was so happy last night. Ron, you've dribbled milk on your chin."

As Ron hastily wiped at his chin and put his spoon down, Harry shook his head numbly at the paper. "They think Sirius had something to do with this..." he muttered, his fists tightening under the table. "They actually think he helped them all break out!"

"Lower your voice!" Ginny hissed.

"Harry, what do you expect? Of course they do." Hermione said to him gently. "They can't very well admit that Dumbledore's been right this whole time about the Dementors turning on them."

Harry became aware suddenly that he had blocked out all sound around them, such was the shock of this news, and he looked up. The sound of his fellow students chattering and utensils clinking on plates slowly filled his ears again—he could not find a single scared face or hear one snatch of conversation beyond his own that concerned the Death Eater escape. He didn't understand why none of them seemed to know or care what was going on. It was so much more important that ten more dangerous wizards had just joined Voldemort's ranks than anything they could possibly be talking about. Homework and Quidditch matches and detention and all that rubbish suddenly paled in comparison to the real threat of the people staring up at him from the cover of the newspaper.

"Harry look at that..." Angelina had nudged him and was now gesturing to the Slytherin table.

His eyes fell on Malfoy.

Malfoy would normally be lazily insulting people under his breath or bewitching food to hit people in the backs of their heads while Crabbe and Goyle guffawed like idiots. It was a different story now. Harry had seen this boy but twice since their return from break, and both times he barely paid him mind. Now, however, Harry really got a good look at him, and what he saw made him stare in slightly surprised curiosity.

Draco was very pale. Of course, the boy's complexion was never what one could call 'warm' but now he was really pale—like sickly, on-the-edge-of-deathly-fever pale. He sat slumped over slightly, his features twitching every now and then with what Harry interpreted as pain. Soon they were all watching him silently as he lowered his head to his palm and closed his eyes briefly, his face twitching like that again before he gingerly sat up straight and unrolled what they could see was a copy of the Daily Prophet. He stared at the cover for a long time and then opened it with one hand. His other arm was tucked against his stomach and he had not touched his food.

"Since when does he read the newspaper?" Ron whispered right before Malfoy sensed their eyes on him and turned in their direction.

They all hastily went back to their breakfast. All except Harry, who remained with his gaze fixed on the boy. Malfoy stared right back, his blue eyes shining brightly with loathing, despite his weakened demeanor.

There was also, Harry was sure, a slight gleam of triumph in them.
"What d'you reckon happened to him?" Ron asked as they made their way to Charms.

Harry stared straight ahead, still picturing Malfoy's expression. "I'll bet his father really meant what he said when he told Malfoy he'd be an unpleasant host over the holidays..." he replied darkly.

"Bloody hell." Ron shook his head. "I almost feel sorry for the kid..." Harry made a face at him before he added, "I said almost."

Among the news of the breakout they had also learned that Broderick Bode, a patient they'd seen at St. Mungo's in Lockhart's ward who had apparently lost all capacity for coherent speech and who had worked as an Unspeakable in the Department of Mysteries, had been killed by Devil's Snare disguised as a harmless potted plant. They all came to the conclusion that this was no mere accident—Bode had been murdered because he had been used in an attempt to snatch the weapon.

Hermione had gone off to send a letter before breakfast had ended (to whom, she wouldn't say), and was now waiting for them in the Charms classroom. "All done," she said somewhat cheerfully when they settled in their seats.

"I hate it when you do that," Ron said, sitting next to her. "Would it kill you to tell us what you're up to for once?"

"You'll see..." was her only reply as she smiled and kissed him on the cheek. He blushed and rolled his eyes.

If Harry had been dissatisfied with the reaction (or lack thereof) to the news of the Azkaban breakout before, he was pleasantly surprised by the late bloom of conversation concerning the subject over the next few weeks.

After a few days, he started seeing people huddled together in the halls, grave expressions on their faces. Students all around him seemed to be talking about many things; either distantly related to or directly concerning the ten Death Eaters that were on the loose—as there was a healthy few of them who had families with connections to the Ministry. There were also students whose families had suffered some terrible tragedy as a result of something one of the Death Eaters had done, not just Neville. Susan Bones (a Hufflepuff in their year) had had several members of her family die at the hands of one of the ten, and so did a few other kids.

Harry also noticed that as the weeks went by, the conversations turned negative in regards to the Ministry's explanation of what exactly happened. A lot of them did not seem to really believe the Prophet's version of things, and he heard many theories (some of which, he was happy to note, matched his own) on what actually went on. More and more students were now looking at Harry in a new light—a favorable one. Then, when it seemed that the rumors and talk would swell to the entire student body at February's eve, another decree went up. Someone had asked Umbridge what she thought of the Prophet article. Of course she refused to comment on it, but when the boy; Lee Jordan; told her Professor McGonagall had informed her Transfiguration class that it should've been obvious what was happening, the plump woman turned a funny shade of purple and the next afternoon Filch was posting the familiar scrolls up all over the school. It stated that all teachers were strictly forbidden to discuss any topic other than the ones they were paid to teach.

Its purpose was clear to everyone, and it only served to fuel their need to know more.

Also Umbridge was watching Harry and the others like a hawk—they couldn't go down to Hagrid's cabin anymore in the evenings and they

had to vary their D.A. schedule even more for fear that she would discover them.

Despite having to be extra careful, however, Harry found that the D.A. meetings were coming along quite nicely. They were learning how to duel, under his instruction and with help from some of the books he'd discovered in the library. The meetings were one of the only two things Harry had to look forward to every day; the first being Angelina. He felt a surge of pride at how nicely everyone was improving; especially Neville. As they had all agreed, no one mentioned what they'd discovered at St. Mungo's, and neither did he. He only worked very hard—harder, even, than Hermione—at whatever new things Harry showed them. His round face was set with determination and focus when Harry taught him the three stances. He learned the Bombarda spell first, and nearly knocked Seamus' head off for real with his Reductor curse. Luckily Hermione set a protection shield around Seamus before damage was done.

The only small annoyance (well, Harry thought of it as rather more than 'small') was Marietta Edgecombe, again. She was late several times and upon being asked where she'd been she only gave vague answers that did little to ease Harry's impatience with her. She was the slowest learner as their dueling practice progressed, but Harry suspected it was only because she was purposefully lagging behind to spite him. He tried asking Cho to speak to her, not wanting to be seen as a violent bully as Marietta had accused him of being before break. Cho said she would do her best, but Harry wondered if he should even keep putting up with it at all.

"Honestly, is she really being such a brat because that git Zach won't go out with her?" Ron asked irritably after a meeting one night. Harry shrugged in answer, rubbing his cheek from the Stinging Hex she had hit him with earlier when he'd shown her how to do it. "Because that is just about the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

"Girls are silly sometimes..." Harry offered, his cheek stinging badly.

"But she's taking it out on you!" was Ron's indignant reply.

"Hermione says we should be patient and let her get over it on her own, or whatever..."

"Rubbish! I'd give her the boot, if I were in charge..."

"Did you see Neville's Stinging Hex?" Harry asked, changing the subject. "It tore right through that cushion like it was thin air. He's really getting good."

Ron, still grumpy from the subject of Marietta, snorted. "I'll bet it's those Death Eaters' escaping what's got him so riled up. The vein in his neck has gotta be almost bigger than my thumb!"

"Well, he's loads better than he was." Harry sighed, forlornly. "I wish I was getting as good in Occlumency as he is at dueling..."

They had reached the common room and were settling down on the chaise lounge. Hermione was lying by the fire on the hearth rug, reading over her Arithmancy homework, having finished escorting her group back safely. She looked up from her parchment and peered over at Harry. "How is that going, then Harry?"

Again, Harry shrugged. "I'm not feeling very confident about it."

In fact, Harry was not getting better at Occlumency at all. In his opinion, he was getting worse with each lesson. Every Monday and Wednesday Harry prepared himself for Snape to find a glimpse of his duel with Malfoy and drag him off by the ear to Dumbledore's office, demanding the worse punishment possible. Every time he felt himself coming closer and closer to being found out, but some other memory presented itself instead, saving him. Not that it made him feel any better to have the professor looking at things like the time Harry wet himself in gradeschool because the teacher wouldn't let him go until he figured out a math problem correctly--or the time Dudley pushed him into the stove while he was cooking breakfast for them all, causing him to burn his hand.

Snape's methods were harsh and very tiring. Harry's mind did not seem to be any stronger or more adept to shutting out the Potions Master's intrusions, and with each passing week his scar hurt more

and more often. Actually, instead of blocking out Voldemort's feelings, Harry found himself experiencing flashes of emotion completely unconnected to his own, and he was still dreaming about the door to the Department of Mysteries. Only now he was staring longingly at the black portal every single night as opposed to every now and then.

"I'm getting sick of that dream," he complained, trying to ignore his stinging cheek and making a mental note to visit Madame Pomfrey first thing in the morning. "I just wish the bloody door would open already so I don't have to stand there gawking at it every night..."

"Harry, you're not supposed to be dreaming about that door at all," Hermione said sternly, sitting up on the hearthrug to glare at him. "You have to try very hard to master Occlumency and do what Snape says. Dumbledore wants--"

"I know what Dumbledore wants, but he doesn't have to get his bloody brains assaulted every week, does he?!" Harry snapped. Hermione crossed her arms huffily but said nothing. "I just don't understand why he wouldn't teach me himself, instead of letting Snape do it when he knows that git hates my guts!"

"Maybe..." Ron started, leaning forward on the couch. He stared into the fire, seemingly lost in thought. "Maybe Snape isn't really trying to help you learn it at all."

"What?" Hermione snapped, rounding on him. "What on earth are you on about, Ron?"

"Well, maybe Snape's softening you up." Ignoring Hermione, he turned his grave expression to Harry. "Softening your mind so it's easier for You-Know-Who to get inside..."

"Shut up, Ronald," Hermione cut in. "You know perfectly well that--!"

"Look, Snape hates Harry, and he used to be a Death Eater, all right? Who's to say he really switched sides like he claims he did? Who's to say he's not double-crossing us all, including Dumbledore, in order to end Harry up like Cedric!" Ron's nostrils flared angrily as he finished, regarding Hermione with a defiant gleam in his blue eyes.

Harry sat on the couch staring at his friend in stunned silence. Hermione took a deep breath and when she spoke next, her voice was filled with the effort she was using to sound patient. "Ron, how many times have you suspected Snape of being a traitor?"

"What's that got to do with--?!"

"And how many times," Hermione cut him off, still straining to sound tolerant. "...have you been completely off base?" Ron clenched his jaw and leaned back on the couch again. "Look, Dumbledore trusts him. And he hasn't ever steered us wrong in the past. If Dumbledore trusts him, that's good enough for me."

Ron said nothing. Neither did Harry.

After a while of trying to coexist in the tense atmosphere that their row had created, both Ron and Hermione gave up and said goodnight to Harry. He noticed they didn't look at each other as they went off in separate directions, and he thought it a shame that he was the cause of their first fight as a couple.

He had just been wondering where Angelina was when she appeared at the entrance to the portrait hole. "I'm glad you're still up," she said, coming towards him. "How's your cheek?"

"It hurts." Harry watched her advance and she sat down next to him on the couch. "Where did you go? You could've gotten caught."

"Hospital wing. Pomfrey was dosing off in her office, but I asked her for this." She produced a small piece of wax paper that was folded over into a square.

Harry frowned at it. "What's that?"

"For your cheek. She said it'll make the stinging stop and the welt will be gone by morning. Here..." She unfolded the paper, revealing a thick, clear substance that looked like colorless jelly. He watched her dab the tip of her index finger in the stuff and when she reached up to dab his face with it he closed his eyes. The substance was very cool

and soothing against his stinging flesh. She rubbed it over the welt Marietta had produced gently, and Harry exhaled. "Feel better?" she whispered.

"Feels really good..."

"Damn that girl. You should've let me get her back."

Harry opened his eyes and looked into her pretty face. They were sitting facing each other, their legs crossed beneath them in the soft cushions of the scarlet couch. She was wearing her school skirt again, and her long, bare legs felt warm and soft as he touched them. She finished rubbing the welt on his cheek and he found himself staring at her hair, which hung loose today and flowed down past her shoulders. He felt, as his gaze moved from her hair to her neck, and then gradually from that to her mouth...he felt mounting arousal creep up on him and before he knew it he had leaned over and kissed her deeply. She made a small noise as his lips pressed into hers and he parted them, sliding his tongue into her mouth slowly. He rocked her back and forth gently with the depth of the kiss, and she allowed him to slide his hands along the length of her thighs until they reached the hem of her skirt.

The common room was uncharacteristically dark and empty except for them.

Harry often wondered, on the many occasions that they found themselves alone in there at night, why it was that they never got caught. He could only attribute this to luck, and truthfully in the moment none of that mattered. They grew breathless as he kissed her over and over again, alternating between sweet, quick touches of their lips and deep, throaty tongue-play. Harry reached under her skirt and found his favorite plaything—her bottom. Gripping it firmly, he scooted her closer to him so she had to fold her legs around him. Angelina tossed the little square of wax paper away and ran her fingers through his hair, causing a surge of feeling to course through his nether regions that felt, all at once, both extremely exciting and slightly painful. He began to grow hard as she arched her back and her pelvis sank into him more, causing her bottom to curve under his

hands and that wonderful pain to beat persistently against the inferno between her legs.

Blood pumped densely into his member...and he wanted to...he wanted to...oh god he wanted to but he didn't know where to begin and their mouths slid apart. He breathed against her full, tender lips, "Angelina..."

She looked, especially in her eyes, as if she really wanted it, too, but she hesitated.

"If you don't think you're ready..." he whispered, the breath streaming out of his nostrils hot and steady. The blood pumped. The pain persisted. He was going mad with the wait. Harry knew he was ready, and though he was struggling to be patient and consider her feelings completely, he felt the overwhelming need to spring into action consuming him rapidly. It astonished him. Yes, it was true that over the weeks and months they had been steadily moving in this direction, but Harry assumed that there would be more talk, careful planning, all that sort of thing. He thought he would see it coming, not that it would spring itself on him like this. It was a feeling no words could describe—he needed relief.

Still, he waited for her to answer him.

"I'm ready. Are you?" her voice was barely audible against the crackling embers in the fireplace. Her eyes...they poured into him, mirroring the same desire he was feeling in every part of his body, one in particular more than others. Feeling as if his head was made of iron, Harry nodded very slowly.

They were so close to each other that her chest was heaving against his as she breathed heavily. Their lips touched but they did not kiss. Harry held onto her, uttering hoarsely: "I love you..."

Angelina whimpered and leaned into him, kissing him passionately, making his head swim. Seconds later his shirt was being tugged roughly over his head, his bare chest meeting her bosom as he almost tore her school blouse open. Shirts off, they concentrated on other clothes—the mad throbbing in Harry's stiff cock growing more

and more intense as more flesh was revealed. "I love you, too, Harry," Angelina moaned into his ear, her mouth pressed hotly against it as she reached down and unzipped his pants. Harry thought he would pass out from the exquisite pain the sensation of her hands brushing against him down there caused. Boldly, his chest rising and falling rapidly with his erratic breathing, Harry tugged off her underwear. She leaned back and let him pull the soft, black things down her legs and over her toes.

The fire crackled. The grandfather clock ticked. They panted.

Harry pulled her close again, her legs still wrapped around him. Like leaning too close to the flames, his sensitive flesh neared the inferno between her legs. She brought him down on top of her and whispered again in his ear, this time telling him soothingly that it was okay, that she was ready for him, that she would guide him and he needn't be afraid of her. Harry closed his eyes, the desire reaching its pinnacle, and eased himself inside...

It only lasted for the briefest of moments.

Harry felt the most overwhelming sensation he had ever experienced as the warm, silky inside of her cunt wrapped itself around his flesh like a cocoon, causing him to cry out softly. "Ugnh..." he squeezed his eyes shut and pushed his face into her neck. His back arched sharply—he almost wanted to run away from it, but it just felt so good that he could hardly process what he was experiencing. It was what he had been longing for this whole time; that hot, silky, wet push of himself deep inside her...

"Oh Harry..." he heard from some far off place.

Then snap! The fire went out abruptly, shrouding them in darkness.

They heard the padding of little feet towards them followed by a chirpy humming sound that stopped in a squeak and: "Oh my! Harry Potter, sir?"

Angelina shrieked and Harry immediately pulled himself away, reaching blindly for his shirt and hiking up his pants (thank Merlin he

had left them partially on!) as Dobby's little round, hat-laden head appeared standing before them.

"Dobby!" Harry shouted fit to wake the whole Tower. "Dobby, get out of--!"

"It's an elf?" Angelina's panicked voice echoed near him as she scrambled to close her blouse and pull down her skirt. They both sat up and began pawing at themselves to smooth their hair again and straighten their hastily thrown on clothing. Harry wondered, mortified, where he had tossed Angelina's underwear.

"Um...oh-oh my!" Dobby squeaked nervously. "Dobby is so sorry, sir! Bad Dobby!" And the little elf began to hit himself on the face.

"Dobby, no—stop that," Harry tried to get him to stop, leaning over and grabbing both his little wrists. "Listen, it's okay, just...stop hitting yourself, will you?" Harry was aware his cheeks were blazing and his pants were still unzipped.

Dobby's eyes swelled to enormous round, swimming bulbs. "S-sorry to disturb you, Harry Potter, and miss. Dobby was only coming to do the cleaning! He thought everyone was asleep!"

"I understand, Dobby."

"You isn't angry with Dobby, is you Harry Potter?"

"Eh..." Angelina was sitting with her face in her hands, shaking her head in embarrassment. Harry sighed and let go of Dobby's wrists. "No, we're not angry with you. But, um, do you think you could maybe come back later?"

"Of course, sir!" Dobby bowed so low Harry was afraid his hats would topple off, but he backed up and hopped back over the fire logs, disappearing into the stone back. Seconds later the fire roared to life, cheerily illuminating them once again in warm, amber light.

They sat in humiliated silence for a moment. Harry was afraid to look at her.

When he noticed that she was shaking, he turned to her, alarmed that she had started crying. He tentatively reached a hand out to place gently on her shoulder, and she let out a muffled sob. Harry tried to think of something to say, but then she raised her face from her hands and he discovered that she wasn't crying at all—she was laughing.

He wanted to know just what the hell was so funny.

She fell backwards on the couch, holding her stomach as actual tears welled up in her eyes. She was laughing fit to burst and Harry's cheeks were on fire. "Are you kidding me?" she cried, taking in gulps of breath before erupting into giggles again.

"This is not funny, Angelina."

"Yes, it is!"

"No..."

"A house elf..." her face was flushed. "A house elf caught us doing it! Ha, ha, ha!"

Harry's mouth twitched but he refused to laugh with her. Instead he shook his head pathetically, staring into the fire. When she had finally managed to get a grip on herself (and realized that he was not going to admit the humor of the situation), Angelina sat up again and sighed. She scooted closer to him and leaned into him, kissing him softly just under his earlobe.

"Hey, Harry, it's okay..."

"Says who?" he drew in a breath angrily, his mortification from Dobby's unexpected appearance still lingering.

"We can try again, later."

"I'm sorry..." he turned his watery gaze on her. For some reason he felt a nasty burning in his chest, and some of those feelings from

before (when he'd struggled to handle his first taste of real closeness to her and had unwanted tears) came back.

She kissed him on the mouth. "Don't be sorry, Harry." Then in an intense whisper: "You felt really good..."

"Really?" he breathed; almost sure his arousal was coming back, despite being so thoroughly humiliated mere moments before.

"Yes. And I know you're ready."

"You felt...you felt good, too." Something occurred to him, perhaps too late. "But what about...?" he didn't want to say Malfoy's name. He realized as he sat there that there was another reason he had waited so long to finally make this move with her. She pulled back slightly. Harry licked his lips, turning so he faced her. "I know you can't remember everything—but Angelina, what about going to a teacher?"

"Going to...about-about what happened with...?"

He nodded, studying her. "I mean, I'll support you, whatever you do, but I don't think you should keep quiet about it anymore. I think...I think you should turn him in."

"But, Harry, I don't remember--"

"You're not a liar, Angelina. And we have the playbook. Maybe we could..." He could see that he was upsetting her and he stopped talking. He was spoiling their moment together with talk of Malfoy. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought that up."

"Who?"

"Huh?"

"Who would I go to? Surely not Umbridge?"

"No way, it doesn't have to be her."

Angelina was quiet for a moment and then she kissed him again, her face drawn up in intense contemplation. "Maybe I should sleep in my own room tonight? Give you a chance to recuperate?"

"Um...yeah. Angelina?"

"Hmmm?"

"Are you upset?"

"No. Are you?"

"Really bloody embarrassed."

"Harry...did you mean what you said?" He knew she was referring to when he told her that he loved her. He nodded. Yes he meant that absolutely. She smiled. "Me too..."

They kissed goodnight tenderly. Harry carried himself up to bed. Before he dropped off to his nightly trip to the Department of Mysteries, he tried to imagine what would have happened if they had not been interrupted.

He wondered also, with a slight smile, if he were technically still a virgin.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: I Want You

"So..." Ron scratched his head, watching his white chess pieces get into position. "...what d'you reckon I should get Hermione for Valentine's Day?" They were lying on their stomachs in the common room on a Thursday night with Harry's chess set between them.

Harry looked up from his own black pieces, which seemed to be a little punch-drunk and confused as to which side of the board they belonged, and frowned thoughtfully.

He had not actually told Ron about the thing that happened between him and Angelina the week before. They had not had time to really sit down and enjoy a moment of peace until now; for as exam time neared, their homework increased considerably and almost every night fifth and seventh years all over the castle could be found with their heads in their books. Valentine's Day was very soon, a couple of days away in fact, and Harry had been struggling all week to figure out what he wanted to do with Angelina. The holiday coincided with their Hogsmeade weekend. Harry was glad that they'd have the opportunity to escape the tedium of their studies and take a much needed break just as the weather was turning warmer and wetter.

Fred and George were peddling a whole line of "crazy, romantic" gifts. Among these were singing roses and chocolates with mild doses of various love potions in them that, depending on what kind of piece you ate, would result in anything from the sudden urge to spout poetry to your date to simply wanting to snog all day long. Fred told Harry and Ron that some of the boxes had what they called "rogue chocolates" in them; ones that they had spiked with a potion that would turn a bloke's date into an insufferable nag. "It'll be so funny to see who gets one of those," George snickered evilly. "We only made about a dozen."

"What if your date is already an insufferable nag?" Harry asked lazily. The twins didn't have an answer for that.

Harry did not fancy the idea of giving Angelina a singing rose or a chocolate that could potentially turn her into a trumped-up version of an ill-tempered Hermione. The thing was—well Harry could not help

feeling that he had played his Ace already. Telling her he loved her (which, by all means, he understood now that he really did) seemed to him like something a bloke should say to his girlfriend for the first time on a day like Valentine's Day. He found himself regretting that he had breathed it on her in the common room while he was trying to get into her knickers. Harry daydreamed now of whispering it to her tenderly as they watched the sun set under a tree or something; telling it to her as they held hands and walked along the High Street in Hogsmeade or something romantic like that. But then he pictured himself shrugging and going, "Remember when I said I loved you that night we were having it off in the common room? Yeah, it wasn't just because of that. I really do." Ugh, how lame!

So now that he had told her he loved her, what was there to do next? Now that they had found this emotion and identified it—claimed it for themselves in their young minds—what were they to do with it?

Truthfully, Harry had no clue. He really wished he could talk to Sirius about it. A good dose of his godfather's romantic view would be much appreciated. Whatever Hermione's theories on the underlining motivation for his feelings, Harry dispelled them and concentrated on what was on the surface—real emotion. He looked at Angelina differently now. She was no longer an older girl who held his hand and walked him through their relationship. She was his equal—his 'woman', as Fred phrased it.

Now what to give his woman for Valentine's Day?

"I have no idea..." Harry said aloud, remembering that they were at play and reaching over to nudge his pawn forward. "I don't even know what I'm gonna do with Angelina. Can't help you there, mate, sorry."

Ron shrugged. His own pawn stumbled a little and fell over—Harry's rook that was conveniently positioned immediately attacked the helpless thing. "Oh, you bloody stupid pawn! What'd you fall over for?" he sighed and shook his red hair in his face moodily. "Hermione hasn't mentioned it at all of course, nor given me any hint whatsoever as to what she'd like—squash him! Yes!"

Harry debated it with himself for a moment, then said, as casually as he could: "I told Angelina I loved her."

Ron stopped midway through egging his knight on in its relentless pummeling of Harry's rook and his mouth dropped open. "You what? When?"

"Last week." Harry felt his damned cheeks growing hot. Still, he tried to sound as nonchalant about the whole thing as possible. "She said she loves me too." He coughed, adding hastily, "We did it..."

"What?!"

Several people milling around in the common room looked over at them, and Harry shushed his friend, embarrassed. "Shh...keep your voice down, will you? I don't want the whole Tower to know."

Ron remained staring at Harry in shock for several minutes, actually making the bespectacled boy feel a bit uncomfortable, before closing his mouth slowly and lowering his head to his hands in a miserable slump. "I'm doomed!"

"What?" Harry made a face at the top of Ron's head. "What are you talking about?"

"Harry why did you do that?" Ron raised his head, looking panicked and a little miffed.

Harry scoffed. "Why? Um...are you kidding?"

"Don't you see that if Angelina goes gushing to Hermione that you said you loved her, Hermione'll expect me to say it too? Like, maybe on Valentine's Day? Do you have any idea how much pressure--?"

"Ron, shut up," Harry said, catching on that Ron seemed to be more upset about the 'I love you' part than the sex part. He shook his head at his misguided friend. "Hermione is not that shallow. She knows it's too soon for you guys to be talking about love."

And he started laughing at his friend. Ron blinked at him several times, trying to hang on to his annoyance, but gave up and smiled as he rolled his eyes at himself. “Okay, fine...but if she starts talking about feelings and such I’m gonna feed her one of those snogging chocolates to shut her up.”

Something occurred to Harry and he stopped laughing. “Well, how do you feel about her, Ron?”

Ron blinked twice more. “I...I like her.”

“That’s it?”

“I like her a lot.”

“So what’s the problem?”

Ron did not have an answer for him. He simply shook his head slowly, as if he couldn’t really think there was a problem. A problem, that is to say, beyond his obvious struggle to find himself in a romantic relationship with someone who had been his annoying best friend up until over a month ago. Harry knew how Ron felt, and hoped that things became clearer for him soon.

“Would you look at these stupid things?” Harry gestured to the chessboard, where the pieces on both sides had grown impatient waiting for the boys to make a move and were now attacking each other at random. Ron’s knight raised its sword and decapitated Harry’s queen with a tiny, vicious battle cry. “I need a new set...” he muttered, watching his queen’s head fly off the board and skid to a halt on the rug.

“So...” Ron started like he had earlier, “...you and Angelina actually...did it?”

Harry hesitated, his eyes narrowing past his vision of his queen stumbling around headless, to consider his answer. “Well...I don’t really know. We were kind of interrupted...”

“No way! By who?”

“Dobby, but--” Harry was cut off by Ron’s rather girlish, shrill giggle. The freckled boy clamped his hands over his mouth and kicked his shoes against the rug, laughing so hard that Harry felt the urge to punch him in the arm. “Okay, okay...yes that’s right, laugh it up you git.” Harry rolled his eyes and laughed a bit, too.

“S-Sorry...” Ron breathed after a minute or two of snickering. “Sorry, Harry. Bloody hell I wish I had been a fly on the wall at that exact moment. It’s a wonder Dobby’s eyes didn’t pop out from the shock of seeing your white arse--!”

“Shut up!” Harry did punch Ron in the arm, but only managed to cause the other boy to burst into another fit of tearful laughter. He waited impatiently for Ron to calm down again. “You’re a prat, you know that?”

“I know. Whew! Okay...enough making fun. So...” Ron got serious and leaned over the chessboard, where pieces all over were dragging their mangled bodies back to their respective corners to recuperate. “What happened before Dobby came in?” His voice wavered with suppressed laughter upon saying Dobby’s name but he frowned to make it stop at Harry’s threatening look.

“We just, sort of...it’s-it’s kind of hard to explain. I mean I don’t even know if I’m still a...” he lowered his voice even more. “...a virgin anymore. It was so quick...Dobby came in before I could really do anything.”

“But did you...?” Ron let the rest of the question hang in the air, his mouth open slightly. He was staring at Harry, completely drawn in. “You know--get in?”

“Yeah.” Harry breathed, smiling at the memory of it.

“Then you’re definitely not a virgin anymore, mate. Blimey...” Ron’s blue eyes widened in awe. “What did it feel like?”

Harry lost his smile, thinking hard about the best way to describe the sensation. Truthfully he could not adequately come up with the right

words to explain it, but he gave it a go. "Like...it was very warm and...wet...and...snug. It felt really good."

"Balls and garters, that is so cool!"

Harry felt a surge of pride and lowered his blushing face to the chessboard.

"What's cool?"

Ginny had entered the common room and was now positioning herself cross-legged in front of them on the floor. The boys exchanged glances and both shrugged in unison. "Nothing..." they said. Ginny frowned at them both, looking from one to the other, unconvinced. After a moment of their 'innocent' looks she rolled her eyes.

"Fine, keep your secrets." She looked down at the chessboard. "Harry you'd better give your queen back her head...she's trying to screw your finger onto her neck."

"Um...Harry?"

Angelina sucked her breath in slightly as Harry ran his teeth down the slope of her neck before closing his mouth gently around her soft skin. Discussing those things with Ron produced a need in Harry to find her...and they were on his bed with the crimson canopy curtains drawn. "Hmmm?" he continued kneading her neck with his teeth. His hands roamed, finding the hem of her skirt and sweeping underneath to grasp the mound of flesh awaiting them. She was gripping his shirt collar, one of her legs wrapped around him.

"Uh...ah...about, um, V-Valentine's Day?"

Harry opened his eyes. Shite. He still had no idea what he was going to give her. Candy? No. Roses? Pass. Both were done to death, in his opinion. "Yeah?"

They rested for a moment and she took a breath, not removing her leg from his waist. He also did not let go of her bottom, making lazy

circles on her warm skin with his thumb. Angelina bit her lip and smiled apologetically. “I found out today that the pitch’ll be open for a practice drill that morning...at least for a couple of hours...”

Harry frowned. “Okay...”

“Well, the team still needs a lot of work, and we haven’t had a practice since before break.”

“Right.”

Angelina sighed and continued in a mater-of-fact tone, “So I signed us up for that time slot. Slytherin’s got the pitch for the rest of the day, but I figured if we got in those couple of hours it would warm us up a bit until we could get another slot.” Harry found himself struggling with dual reactions; one of annoyance and one of slight relief. On the one hand, he did not like the idea that she was going to use what was supposed to be a special day for the two of them to practice bloody Quidditch. Relentless woman, he thought to himself. On the other, however, he knew that it meant he would have a couple of hours’ time to come up with something really special for them later. “Are you angry?”

Harry shook his head slowly, his eyes flickering at her. They landed on her lips and he leaned in and kissed her before she could speak again. So he would use the time that she was working hard on the Quidditch pitch to plan a special, romantic...whatever...and he wouldn’t fuss about it. Forgetting about his brief annoyance, Harry slipped his hand into her underwear.

“I promise, I’ll...c-come straight to you when we’re...f-finished...ohh...” his finger was inside, moving very slowly but very purposefully. He watched her mouth, her eyes, felt her thigh tighten around his waist. Harry was grateful the door was locked—no repeats of the Dobby incident, if you’ll please.

“Okay...” he quickened his movements and she buried her face in his neck.

They decided to meet in Hogsmeade after the practice drill and spend the rest of the day together.

Angelina went to bed feeling...good; about Harry, about their relationship, about Quidditch practice, about a lot of things...

There was one thing that rested in the back of her mind, almost hiding from her really, but she left it there until she was ready to fetch it to the light. She knew that eventually she would need to make a decision about Harry's suggestion to go to a teacher about Malfoy. But, who? And when? After so long...she worried it would do little good. And she still could not remember—there, see, she was thinking about it. Much keener to focus on happier things, Angelina spent Friday with her "head in the clouds" as her mother would say.

There were many things keeping her afloat on Valentine's eve, making her dark skin glow and her smile slightly wider. She spent a lot of time reminiscing on Harry's tendency to adopt a husky, altogether more seductive way of speaking to her when they were in each other's arms. His strength now—how he held her with firm possessiveness as of late...the night in the common room had not been her plan. She had simply wanted to give him something to ease his discomfort, then perhaps a few kisses and off to bed. Funny how hands change—it was he who initiated it and damn all she could not resist him. He was changing. For the better! Angelina fancied that she had remained, for the most part, a constant in their relationship; at least in the sense that she had always been the aggressor, even though she scarcely had more experience than he did. Angelina was a confident person; always had been. She found it a bit easier to take the lead in the beginning, but the tide was turning. It was fine by her.

He said he loved her!

Of course...one had to consider the timing...but she really felt he meant it. If she had sensed any insincerity on his part she would not have allowed herself to continue. Besides, Angelina just didn't believe Harry was the sort of person who would lie about something like that just to get in a girl's pants.

"Do you think he meant it?" she had asked Hermione. Funny she seemed to be spending more time with Hermione Granger these days.

But her being one of Harry's best friends gave her certain appeal to Angelina that could not be denied. Also, Hermione was a helpful, passionate person who often had wonderful insight when one really needed some.

Hermione smiled. "I think he did. The way he talks about you...he doesn't realize he does it, but his whole demeanor changes. Angelina, you've really affected him." She paused, studying Angelina for a moment before asking, "And do you love him?"

Angelina couldn't help hearing the smallest tone of concern in her voice. "I really think I do..." she scoffed. "Huh. It's so strange...at the beginning of the year I barely knew him. And now..."

And now.

She loved him. She had worried, though she kept these things to herself, that she was not really the kind of girl he wanted. This had always been in the back of her mind. She was, as plainly as one could state it, a tall black girl who played Quidditch and had been 'one of the blokes' for most of their time at Hogwarts together. Extremely competitive, kind of bossy, and monotone most of the time unless she found something truly exciting or felt vulnerable for some reason. She was a girl, yes (and, she had been told, a very attractive one at that) but she spent all six-and-a-half of her school years messing about with Fred and George. She got dirty and she cursed and sometimes people; mostly other girls or boys that particularly annoyed her; accused her of being mean. She had a dark, milk-chocolate complexion and thick, long black hair that she often wore in a ponytail to escape the bother. She was curvy in places that other girls weren't. One place (the last place she would ever have thought he'd be so fond of, truth be told) had been appointed Harry's favorite place, and it was all very funny to her.

When Angelina thought of the kind of girls Harry should've been attracted to, she thought of girls like Cho. Sweet girls who smiled more often; girls with fair complexions and softer bodies. Girls his own age. Angelina was not blind. She saw these girls all the time, stealing glances at him in the halls and during meals and they probably gushed over him in all his classes, too. Pavarti Patil had

been so beside herself when he'd asked her to the Ball, it was embarrassing for Angelina to watch, really. There were blonde girls and girls with gorgeous red hair (she fancied she saw Harry's appreciative gazes at Ginny Weasley a few times); girls who were his height that seemed to be intelligent who spoke to him every day with a hopeful gleam in their eyes. Girls that, truthfully, Angelina thought might just...fit more...with him.

Hmmm...but no. Harry chose her. Harry kissed her and held her and called her his Angel and...loved her for who she was.

He made her happy. He was a sweet boy, a strong boy. He had a dark, saddening past and he lived his life under the (at times) very malicious scrutiny of everyone around him. She admired his courage and envied his talent. It was not hard at all to fall for Harry Potter. As shy as he was sometimes, as volatile as he could be, as headstrong as he became when it concerned what he thought was right—those were all the things that drew her to him.

And. And, and, and...there was a surprising bonus. When she saw, even though she only got a small glimpse the other night under the flickering light of the fire, what Harry Potter carried around with him all day long extended to its full length as it came toward her, she had to hold back an astonished gasp—for it was a wonder the boy felt comfortable sitting on a broom at all.

On the morning of Valentine's Day, Angelina woke up early and roused Katie and Alicia. She was feeling very cheerful. She hummed to herself softly while she showered, wondering what on earth she and Harry would do when they met up; though she had an idea, and she snickered wickedly as she lathered her sponge.

"My boyfriend is upset that we're practicing today, I hope you know, Angelina..." Katie said as they dressed.

"Well you should've told him he'll have plenty of opportunity to feed you Snogging Chocolates later this afternoon, then." Angelina dodged a flying pillow and the girls finished dressing.

She was confronted, as soon as she stepped into the common room, by a singing rose. Fred held it up to her, and it bellowed in Latin with a loud, operatic tenor. “La, la, la, la, laaaaa! Mi amor!”

“Happy Valentine’s Day troll face.” The twins chimed, each kissing her on either cheek. Angelina laughed and took the rose, hugging them both in turn before pulling out her wand and casting a Silencio. They acted affronted, their mouths dropping open. “It’s a lovely rose, but honestly that singing will give a girl a headache.”

“True enough...” Fred agreed. “But that’s why we love the little guys so much.”

“That and they’ve made us a fortune,” George added. “They can sing in four different languages, you know. You’ve just ruined a really good charm.”

“You’ll live. Happy Valentine’s Day, you two.” She frowned when she realized that it was a Saturday at nearly eight in the morning and they were the only ones in the common room, besides a couple of Quidditch team members looking sleepy and ill-tempered. “Why are you up so early?”

“Oh we’ve got work to do,” George said conspiratorially. “Making a new batch of products today. No girly love stuff for us, no sir.”

“Be careful, please?”

“Of course, quit your nagging. Go off and practice.” There was a bit of a wistful shadow in their eyes as they looked at her Quidditch robes, causing her to kiss them both and whisper her thanks again for the rose.

Angelina carried the rose upstairs to the boys’ dorms, where she slipped into Harry’s and Ron’s room silently. They were all still asleep, including, Angelina was not pleased to see, her Keeper and one of her Chasers. She frowned at Ron and Dean’s slumbering forms under their scarlet covers and decided to allow them to wake up on their own—they knew not to be late to practice. She walked over to Harry’s bed, where he was lying all twisted up like he had attempted

to turn over and lay on his back sometime during the night but only his upper half obliged. His legs lay at an awkward angle sideways while his torso was flat on the mattress, his arms open. His chest rose and fell slowly...his breathing was deep and soft.

Angelina set the rose on his windowsill and reached down to stroke his disheveled hair. He twitched and rolled over completely on his side, taking a deep sighing breath before settling into sleep again. Angelina smiled at him and knelt down to the side of the bed, resting her arms on the mattress and her head on her arms.

"Harry..." she whispered. He opened his eyes slowly. "Happy Valentine's Day."

Though he was still in the dregs of sleep, Harry smiled lethargically and leaned over to kiss her on the lips. He lay there, his eyelids not willing to completely reveal the vivid green she so loved looking into. "Happy Valentine's Day, Angelina..." He kissed her again and yawned.

"I'm headed for breakfast, then the pitch," she told him, lifting her fingers to play with a lock of hair that had fallen over his eye. "You need a haircut."

"I don't like haircuts."

"So I see..." Angelina chuckled and kissed him several times all over his face before standing up from her kneeling position. "I'll meet you in a few hours?"

"Okay. Where?" Harry sat up and rubbed his eyes, yawning again. "Shall we say the Three Broomsticks?"

"Sure."

"Like noon-ish?"

"A little after noon, but yeah."

He looked disappointed for a split second, but nodded. "Have a good practice, then."

"Thanks," she turned to leave, reaching the door before her heart gave a pleasant little quiver and she turned back. "Harry?"

"Huh?"

"I love you."

He grinned, and even from across the room she could see his eyes sparkle with 'aw shucks' contentment. He looked around to make sure none of his roommates were awake to take the mickey out of him before uttering, "I love you too."

Harry considered how he would dress for the day very carefully when he finally got up.

The clean, white cotton tee shirt, crisp black button down shirt worn open, and the only pair of jeans he owned that were not baggy hand-me-downs from Dudley made the cut. He didn't really own any casual dress shoes, so he cleaned off his Chucks as best he could and put them on.

His hair, well...his attempts to flatten it failed, so he simply ran his hands through it a few times until it did something as close to behaving like normal hair as it ever would. Every now and then he fussed with it nervously, but without any real hope of it doing what he wished. After a quick polishing of his glasses, Harry turned to Dean and Neville, raising his arms as if to say 'tadaaa!'

"How do I look?"

Dean tapped his chin with his finger thoughtfully and then gave Harry a thumbs up. Neville smiled and shrugged. "Not bad, there, Harry," he said awkwardly. It was maybe the most words Neville had spoken to him in weeks. "Nice touch with the dress shirt."

"Thanks, Neville!"

"You look like a prat," Ron muttered from behind Harry.

Harry turned around to see his best friend pulling his Quidditch shirt over his head. He blew his red hair out of his face and reached down to grab his boots, not looking at his friend. "What's your problem?" Harry asked, self-consciously smoothing his hair again.

Ron offered him a bitter glance before rolling his eyes and harshly lacing up his worn-in Quidditch boots. "Oh nothing. Just that you get to go off and enjoy the day while I'm stuck at practice. And I still haven't figured out what in bloody hell I'm gonna give my girlfriend."

Dean chuckled. "You and me both, mate."

"Shut up, Dean."

"Touch-ee!" Dean shrugged and threw his boots over his shoulder by the laces, trudging out of the room without another word, a slightly amused smile on his lips.

Harry sighed and shoved his hands in his pockets. "You know, I would love to be going where you're going this morning..."

Ron finished lacing his boots and stood up from the edge of his bed. He looked at Harry, still not softening. "Yeah, well, I would love that too. So Angelina would let me quit the team and you can be all brilliant like you usually are."

Harry opened his mouth to retort but Ron grabbed his broom and stalked away from him, through the door. He looked to Neville and Seamus. Both of them shook their heads and continued dressing.

Harry and Ron didn't say much to each other at breakfast. Ron knew perfectly well that Harry missed Quidditch with a passion, as did Harry that Ron wished he were a better player. So with these things understood but not spoken, the two boys ate in silence. Hermione joined them as Harry was buttering a piece of toast.

"Morning," she smiled and leaned over the table to kiss Ron on the lips. He turned slightly pinker than usual and muttered 'happy

Valentine's Day' while she was settling herself on the bench. "Happy Valentine's Day to you, too, grumpy."

Harry scoffed and bit into his toast, drawing a 'grumpy' look from Ron. After a moment in which Harry chewed thoughtfully and Hermione stirred her porridge, Ron sighed and cleared his throat. "Ok, so—Hermione, what do you want to do today when I get out of practice, then?" he said it quickly, in one breath, and the pink tinge in his cheeks deepened slightly.

"Oh, um..." she smiled at him. "I don't know. What would you like to do?"

Harry suddenly felt as if he were a third wheel. It was an awkward feeling.

"Er..." Ron looked down at his eggs as if for an answer. "Well I heard about this place--"

Just then the post owls arrived, swooping in through the open windows. An unfamiliar brown and gray owl landed neatly in front of Hermione and she dropped her spoon into her porridge bowl, shooting her hand out for the letter the owl was carrying.

"Oh about time! If it hadn't come today..." Harry and Ron watched, confused, as she read the letter over quickly. When she had finished, she looked up at Harry urgently. "Harry, will you do me a huge favor?"

"Sure..."

"Meet me at the Three Broomsticks around twelve-thirty?"

Harry frowned. "Well, I was supposed to meet up with Angelina there at that same time. What's this all about?"

"I promise it'll be fast, but it's really important. I don't have time to explain it, now. Angelina won't mind, will she? Please?"

"Um...okay then."

"Great! I've got to answer this quickly..." She was on her feet suddenly. "Listen Ron, we can figure out what we're doing later, all right?"

"Yeah, all right..."

"Have a great practice, see you later!" And she was off again, walking briskly towards the entrance, having stolen Harry's toast right out of his hands.

"Well...that's settled, then." Ron stood up from the table and Harry, not having any toast to finish, did as well. The two of them made their way out of the Great Hall. They ran into Hagrid, who looked even worse than when they'd last seen him. His face was bruised all over, with some glistening cuts under his eye and on his forehead. He was also wearing a bandage around his left hand.

"All righ', you two?" Hagrid greeted them, attempting to smile without hurting himself.

"Hey, Hagrid," the boys chimed. Ron grimaced at the state of the large man as they fell into slow steps with him towards the oak front doors. "What are you carrying?"

Hagrid looked down at the creaky bucket he was holding in his good hand. "Oh, it's chili powder. Salamanders' got scale rot."

"You're not coming down to Hogsmeade?" Harry asked as they stepped out into the bright, cool day.

"Nah. Looks like it migh' rain...But you go on an' enjoy yerself. Got anythin' special planned?"

Both boys shrugged and Hagrid frowned at them for a moment before lifting the bucket in farewell and lumbering down the hill that led to his cabin. "He looks awful..." Ron muttered. Harry nodded his agreement.

They stood shuffling their feet for several seconds, and then Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "H-Have a good practice, okay Ron?" he offered his friend a smile.

"Cheers, mate. See you later."

Harry watched Ron walk away towards the path that led to the pitch. He found himself feeling very envious of his friend just then. Or maybe it had nothing to do with Ron at all...Harry just really, really missed flying. He looked up, where he could see a few players already hovering or zooming around over the pitch in the distance. He knew one of them was Angelina. Ron disappeared down the path, and Harry stood there watching the players fly around for several moments, his chest swelling.

"You really miss it, don't you?"

He turned at the sound of her sweet voice, and saw Cho standing there, smiling serenely at him. He smiled back. She looked very pretty with her hair tied back. She was wearing a red skirt. "Yeah...I really do."

"You're on your way to Hogsmeade?"

"Yep. You?"

"Uh huh. I was supposed to go with some friends, but they've all got...well...you know. Boyfriends and stuff."

Harry watched her blush and look down at her shoes. "Well who needs them? I'll walk you down there if you want."

"Er...d-don't you have plans with Angelina?"

"Oh, well I'm meeting her later, but she's out there at the moment." He nodded his head towards the pitch in the distance. "So I'm on my own for a couple of hours, if you wanna have a look at some shops or get some butterbeer or something."

"Okay!" she brightened and her smile came back. They fell into step with each other down the incline that divided the path to Hagrid's cabin from the path that led to the pitch. They talked of Quidditch and the World Cup as they descended, the sun casting a cool white light

over the grounds. There was a slight breeze in the air. Harry couldn't see what Hagrid was talking about when he mentioned rain; the sky looked very bright and clear in his opinion. He found that it was much easier for him to talk to Cho now. He could scarcely recall what his problem had been the year before—she was a funny, sweet, easy-going girl that didn't seem that intimidating anymore. She laughed and tossed her ponytail at something he said just as they were reaching the queue of students being checked out through the gate by Filch. "There's a rumor they'll set off more soon," she was saying, lowering her voice when they got in line.

Harry furrowed his brow. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Oh just around. I wonder what the next ones will spell out..." she was referring to the Weasley's Wildfire Whizbangs fireworks display people seemed to think would make another appearance at Hogwarts soon.

Harry laughed and opened his mouth to suggest a particularly funny slogan they could use for another Umbridge display when Pansy Parkinson and a gang of mean-faced Slytherin girls came strolling down the gravel carriageway towards them. Upon sight of Harry and Cho, Pansy sneered and crossed her arms, fixing them with what Harry thought looked like an impersonation of Malfoy's usual 'I'm better than you' stare.

"When the beanpole's away, the boys will play, huh Potter? Eww, what are you doing with Chang?" she said loudly, causing several kids in line to turn and look at them curiously. Her gang of airheads giggled stupidly. "Ha ha, I guess your girlfriend would rather practice than spend Valentine's Day with you!"

Harry simply watched her and her friends laugh at them, trying to do as Hermione suggested to him so many times and control his temper. He was aware that Cho had turned a deep shade of pink next to him and that her fists were balled up at her sides. "Just ignore them..." he tried under his breath. But she was shooting daggers at Pansy.

"Whatcha got to say, Chang?" Pansy asked threateningly. When Cho said nothing, she added, "Chang and Potter, what a perfect couple!"

You know, Potter, you'd better be careful—boys are just dying to be with Chang!"

The girls screamed with laughter. Harry stepped forward automatically, heat rising to his temples, though he didn't really know what he was prepared to do to a gaggle of girls with Filch standing mere feet away. The old coot was pretending not to hear Pansy at all, but Harry knew perfectly well that she was speaking loud enough to reach the front of the line. Harry barely had his mouth open before Cho whipped out her wand and aimed it at Pansy.

"Shut up!" she yelled. "You shut up or I'll hex you so good your own mother won't recognize your snotty face!" Harry turned, mildly awestruck, to see Cho's nostrils flaring angrily. He wasn't surprised to see that this did little to diminish her prettiness.

Pansy had clamped her mouth shut and was now staring at Cho with fright in her eyes.

"Miss Chang!" It was McGonagall, who was now descending the incline and making her way towards them, her robes fluttering in the breeze. She stopped near Pansy and her friends, peering at Harry and Cho over the top of her spectacles. "Put your wand away this instant or I will march you straight back up to the castle to serve detention with Mr. Filch for the rest of the day."

"B-But they--!" Cho sputtered, still glaring at Pansy.

"Wand away, Miss Chang." Reluctantly, slowly, Cho put her wand away again. McGonagall jabbed a finger toward the queue, indicating that Pansy and her friends should join it. "I suggest you girls get in line, quietly, or I'm afraid you won't be able to visit Hogsmeade today."

"Yes, Professor..." The girls joined Harry and Cho at the back of the line as McGonagall stood watching them all for several seconds. When she was satisfied that no more trouble would surface, she marched ahead to join Filch at the gate. As soon as McGonagall was gone, however, Pansy leaned forward and whispered nastily: "Better watch that temper, Chang. Barking like a dog makes you even uglier

than you already are. And when Potter dumps you, who's gonna wanna be your boyfriend then?" She snickered at her own hollow wit.

Harry turned around, getting right in her face. "I didn't happen to see your boyfriend around anywhere, Parkinson. I suspect he got sick of you running your stupid mouth all the time, right? At least Cho has someone besides a bunch of stupid girls to be with on Valentine's Day."

Pansy glared at him. "For your information," she said in a shaky voice. "Draco has Quidditch practice--"

"Not right now, he doesn't." Cho cut her off, now adopting a bitter smile. "No, I'll bet he's off snogging his other girlfriend and the two of them are laughing about what an idiot you are! I know it for a fact!"

Pansy made a horrible face and went to lunge at Cho, but Cho was too quick for her. She whipped her wand out again quick as a flash; this time very covertly, so no one but the three of them saw it. The line was moving. Cho and Harry backed up as it did.

"See you around, Parkinson." Harry waved. Cho stowed her wand away again and turned around with Harry to move along innocently, leaving Pansy snarling at their backs. "That was brilliant, Cho." Harry chuckled and bumped her lightly with his arm. She grinned at him.

"Yeah...my reflexes are improving, thanks to you."

They got checked out by Filch and McGonagall before continuing on down the gravel drive and into Hogsmeade Village. The subject of what Pansy would look like in various animal forms carried them all the way down to the High Street, where many students were milling about among the villagers. The day still seemed bright and cool and sunny. Harry ran a hand through his hair and gestured for Cho to follow him. They saw flyers posted up in most of the shop windows warning people about the ten Death Eaters that escaped Azkaban. Harry and Cho stopped in front of a shop window with a particularly large poster on it. Harry's eyes were once again drawn to the picture of Bellatrix Lestrange, who stared back at him menacingly. Cho said

something about the absence of Dementors in the village and he tore his eyes away, looking around with her.

“Last year, when that Sirius Black escaped, they were everywhere, remember?”

Harry nodded faintly. “Yeah...”

He knew now with certainty that Dumbledore was right—the Dementors were on Voldemort’s side again.

“So...what do you want to do?”

Harry was brought out of his thoughts and he looked over at Cho, whose hair was shining in the white sunlight. He really needed to find something to buy for Angelina, but how to mention this? Maybe I shouldn’t, he thought. Maybe I should just go around to some shops with her and if I find something for Angel I’ll just buy it. That settled, Harry answered her. “Um, d’you wanna just walk around? There’s a few places I still haven’t been.”

“Okay, then.”

So they walked along the High Street, talking about various things, Quidditch prominent among them. Cho reminded Harry of the time Wood yelled at him to stop being a gentlemen and knock her off her broom during one of their matches third year. He kept his eyes peeled as they stepped into a couple of warm, dusty shops for anything Angelina might like. He thought he saw a nice locket but when Cho saw him looking at it she tried it on, and he realized upon a more careful inspection that it wasn’t something he could picture Angelina wearing. He bought them both giant strawberry licorice sticks at Honeydukes Sweetshop.

They were about to turn onto another street to look for more shops there when Harry felt the wind change and then the sky darkened. He looked up and was immediately hit in the eye with a large, cold drop of rain.

“Oh no...” Cho said through a mouthful of licorice. “Is it going to--?”

And then it simply started—the rain came down in a huge sheet upon them, pelting the pavement loudly. Harry and Cho dropped their licorice wands and he lifted his arm to protect her hair as they ran for it. “Where are we going?”

Cho looked around hastily and then pointed to a tea shop nearby that looked warm and inviting. “How about Madame Puddifoot’s?”

“Angelina, look out!”

Angelina turned just in time to see that a bludger was heading straight for her face. She swerved out of its path right before it would’ve collided with her, probably breaking her nose, and it zoomed past her into the stands. It circled around the Hufflepuff tower and came back, but Kirk was already on his way to catch it, and he pummeled it with his bat.

“Thanks, Kirk!”

He nodded and swept away. They had been practicing for most of the morning when the rain started, and Angelina was looking up at the thunder clouds resentfully when the bludger had come her way. The whole team was now struggling to get through the scrimmage they’d started up, even though the rain was now falling so hard that they could barely see each other through sheets of the stuff as it cascaded down on them. Angelina watched Ron nearly fall off his broom as he swerved to attempt a save, and she was struck with a strong feeling of *dé ja vous*. She soared around them, trying to pick each member out through the rain, but it was doing no good. They would have to stop.

The sky had grown darker and the thunder was rumbling, every now and then crackling loudly so that their shouts to each other were drowned out. Angelina snatched her whistle to her mouth when she saw Ron miss yet another save and blew on it hard. Ginny, who was hovering near her, had just made a grab for the Snitch; how in the world that girl could see it through all that rain was beyond Angelina. She missed it and it zoomed away, but Angelina shook her head and called out, “It’s too much, we have to stop here!”

Everyone closed in to a tight circle in the middle of the pitch, and Angelina shouted at them as best she could whilst her soaking hair fell into her eyes and her robes sagged over her broom, making it harder for her to control her hover.

"Listen, we've all made a good effort today, but it's bloody brutal out here! Maybe we can come back tonight after dinner if you guys--?"

"NO!" they all shouted at her in unison, for most of them had late Valentine's Day plans and even those who didn't wanted some peace after being beaten up by the rain for the last leg of their three and a half hour practice drill. They all touched down and trudged along the soggy grass. Ron and Dean carried the trunk and Angelina followed them off the pitch, feeling very disappointed. Although they had gotten in some good time with clear skies, they hadn't really gotten all the way back into the swing of things before the rain started. If only we'd gotten a little more time...she thought, kicking at a small puddle.

"S'ok, Angelina," Ginny said next to her as they entered the tunnel. "We still have weeks before the match. We'll be ready."

Angelina smiled at the girl, though that optimism hadn't quite reached her yet.

They stored their things in their lockers, none of them wanting the hassle of lugging their brooms and bags up to the castle in the rain. Angelina saw Ron dejectedly sitting down on one of the benches, looking at Harry's locker for a moment before sighing and kicking his own shut with the tip of his boot. She thought about saying something to him, but realized that maybe he might just want to be alone with his thoughts. After all, it was often that she and the others would try to encourage him or dismiss his self-deprecation and he almost always resisted their efforts. She thought maybe this time she would leave him be.

Angelina shook her wet hair out of her face and made her way out of the changing room. She was walking down the tunnel when she heard voices ahead of her, and at first thought that some of her team

members had lingered to walk with her. But as she got closer, she realized that the voices were coming from the Slytherin locker room.

“I’m fine, Montague.” Draco’s voice.

“You look like you’re about to fall over, Malfoy.” Montague’s hard-edged monotone reached her ears. “How are you gonna be fit to play, or even practice for that matter? You’re as pale as a crab’s belly.” There was a pause. “Was it really bad? I mean...what did it feel like?”

“What do you think, idiot?”

“Sorry. But, honestly, how many times did he--?”

“Shut up about it, all right?” They had emerged from the locker room and were now walking ahead of her, their gear strapped on, carrying their brooms. Malfoy did indeed look, even from behind, very pale and he was walking much slower than Montague. “I said I’ll be fine. Besides...” Angelina followed them and they slowed their pace, stopping just at the tunnel opening, where they could see the sheets of rain pelting the grass hard. Malfoy gestured with his broom. “I wouldn’t be worrying about me right now.”

“You’re afraid of a little rain?” Montague scoffed. She could see his jaw lift into a smile from behind. “That’s why those Gryffindor losers don’t stand a chance against us, even if Johnson has got her stupid playbook back. They tuck tail and run, even against something as silly as rain...”

“Is that right, Montague?”

The boys turned around to spot her. She crossed her arms and glared at Montague, who was still smiling snidely. Draco straightened himself up upon sight of her, attempting to look a good deal more healthy and strong than he was. His face was almost completely devoid of color. His eyes were very pale blue. He looked so sick...

“Yeah, that’s right Johnson. I saw your Keeper couldn’t even stay on his broom when this started up,” he gestured behind him to the cascade outside the tunnel. A roar of thunder erupted and he laughed.

"He'll have to do better than that if McGonagall wants to keep her bony old claws on the Cup."

"That Cup isn't going anywhere." She stepped right up to Montague, ignoring Malfoy's unusual silence, staring him down. "So you go have fun in the rain like the child you are, and I'll see you at the match."

"Who are you calling a child, Johnson?" Montague gritted, stepping up to her. He was much bigger than her but she had her wand and she knew that he could not be faster. Thank Harry for the D.A.—she would hex him good if he tried anything.

"I thought I made myself clear, or was I speaking too fast for you?"

He balled up his fist and snarled at her but she did not back down.

"Hey, let's go, we're getting soaked out 'ere!" someone bellowed from the pitch.

Montague's eyes didn't leave hers as he backed up. "Come on, Malfoy, leave her."

Angelina watched Montague run out into the rain, leaving Malfoy standing there in the dark tunnel with her. She turned her gaze to him. He was staring at her still, not speaking and looking so very pale. Angelina was on the point of walking out herself when he moved, stepping towards her. She stopped in her tracks, reaching for her wand that was tucked into her robes. "Don't you come near me."

A slight smile played at his lips. "Are you afraid of me, Johnson?"

"Hardly."

Draco raised his chin, regarding her coolly, his eyes sparkling. "So I guess Potter gave you back your precious playbook."

She was caught off her guard by the comment, and momentarily confused by his indirect acknowledgement that he'd stolen it. But then again it didn't seem too beyond him. She doubted he cared

much about it any more, especially in the face of whatever it was he was currently dealing with.

"Yes he did," she answered somewhat defiantly.

He scoffed at her, and the slight grimace that accompanied it was not lost on her. Though she could not tell if this was due to what he said next, or if it was because he was in pain. "Then you probably saw what was in it."

"Yes..."

Draco gave a small chuckle then. He was laughing at himself, she could tell, and this really threw her for a loop. He shook his head slowly. "Such a waste...my father was right. I was really stupid."

"What are you talking about?"

"You read what I wrote?"

"Yes I did."

"Then you understand what I mean." He took another step towards her. She stiffened, fixing him with a warning look.

"What is your problem? Don't you get it? I am with Harry, and You-Know-Who will surrender to Dumbledore before I ever think twice about you!"

"What the hell is so special about Potter?" He spat, grimacing again. "You're a pureblood, and if you weren't a bloody Gryffindor you'd be all right."

"What does that have to do with anything? Why are you doing this, haven't you gotten bored with this game yet?"

"Don't be stupid, Johnson. Why do you think I bother with you at all? You think I waste my time on you because it's fun?" He smiled again suddenly, and added: "Well sometimes it's fun, but..."

"What?" she snapped hotly. "If you're talking about--!"

"Admit it. You don't remember everything, but I know you remember what counts." He stepped closer. "And there's a part of you Johnson...deep down inside...you liked being roughed up didn't you? 'Else why've you kept quiet about it for so long? You didn't even tell Potter at first!" He laughed at her now. "He had to find out by spying on us!"

"Merlin..." Angelina shook her head slowly at him, completely gobsmacked by his audacity. "You need help, Draco. Something is seriously wrong with you. You're all mixed up..."

"Oh you think I'm mixed up, do you? Think I'm confused? Think I'm a nutter like your precious Pottykins?" He was mocking her now and she could see that what she said affected him. He scoffed again. "You're not listening to me, Johnson."

He had lost his smile and was watching her very intensely, his eyes practically peeling off every layer of clothing she wore boldly as he backed her into the wall. She watched as his hand came up, very slowly, and his cold touch approached her cheek. Angelina was frozen in place, wanting to get him away from her and run for it but not being able to make herself move.

"I don't give a damn about Potter. I don't even think I care what my father says. I just know what I want and I can't stand it anymore. Angelina..." he called her by her first name.

They heard Montague's whistle, heard some voices over the pounding sound of rain shouting, "Where the bloody hell is Malfoy?!"

He was standing very close to her, now. His eyes flickered down to her lips...this gesture was so familiar. Angelina felt a bit panicked. She had been in this position before, only...She wanted so badly to kick him but for pity's sake she was glued to the wall, watching from the outside—like watching two different people rather than Draco and herself. She was unaware of her breathing, which was heavy and her chest was rising and falling hard. This seemed to excite him; his eyes gleamed dangerously. Draco exhaled warm breath on her.

“I want you.”

“Draco stop it.”

She felt him take hold of her arms firmly. The panic was rising in her chest, heading for her throat. Why couldn’t she move, damn it?

“Did you hear me, Angelina? I said...I want you.” He leaned in and a second later his lips were pressed against hers. Then came his tongue, very harshly, his cold skin giving her chills. Angelina’s brain clicked slowly into place like the combination dial on a safe and she finally sprang into action, pushing him off of her.

Draco fell roughly to the ground, his face contorted in pain. At first he did not attempt to get up, and she could see that the fall had hurt him. She had no sympathy. The anger was rising now, replacing the panic. “Are you hurt?” she spat furiously, “Good! Whatever your father did to you, you deserved it!”

“You shut your mouth!” he growled, saliva running over his bottom lip and sweat springing to the surface of the skin on his forehead. “You have no idea...urghhh...” he closed his eyes as he hugged his stomach with one of his arms, the other arm supporting him as he struggled to rise to his feet again.

“Angelina, what’s going on...?” Angelina’s breath caught in her throat as she turned to see Ron approaching them down the tunnel, his red hair a vibrant contrast to the darkness surrounding him. His eyes shifted from her to Draco and he immediately dropped his bag and reached into the folds of his robes for his wand. “Malfoy--!”

“No, I’m fine, Ron.” Angelina reassured him quickly, holding a hand up to settle him as he aimed his wand at the fallen Draco.

“Go on put your wand away, Weasel,” Draco uttered shakily, his eyes still closed to the torment in his body. “We both know you’re no better at using it than you are at Quidditch.”

"Your father been hitting you with a little Cruciatus, Malfoy? Getting you ready to join him and his fellow Death Eaters, I expect." Ron spoke very quietly, his blue eyes burning. Draco's own eyes flew open and he glared at Ron. "I don't need to use my wand against you. You're obviously done for."

Without another word and a somewhat hard glance at Angelina, Ron picked up his bag again, stepped over Draco's crumpled body, and walked out into the rain. Angelina stared down at the boy for a moment, putting two and two together, before turning to follow her Keeper.

The little shop was very warm and very pink.

It reminded Harry, very unpleasantly, of Umbridge's office. There were small round tables cluttering the little space, each with only two chairs. Cherubs fluttered above the tables where there were couples sitting, sprinkling handfuls of glittering pink and red confetti over their heads. Harry wiped the fog from the warmer temperature off his glasses with the back of his arm and pushed his damp hair out of his face. "Um...shall we just sit by the window over there?"

"Okay." He and Cho weaved precariously through the tiny spaces between the tables and squeezed into seats on either side of a table by the shop window. A Cherub came flittering over to them and Harry frowned at it, ducking his head out of the way as it tossed a handful of confetti at him. "Isn't it nice in here?" Cho asked, smiling at the Cherub and laughing a little when it tossed her some confetti. Little squares of red and pink got stuck in her hair and on her cheek. "It's all decorated for Valentine's Day."

"Sure." Harry lied, scooting his chair up awkwardly.

Madame Puddifoot, a plump woman with black hair pulled into a neat little ball at the top of her head, came bustling up to them, smiling sweetly. "What can I get for you, dears?"

"Two coffees, please." Cho answered cheerfully.

"Won't be a moment!" And she was off again.

Silence fell once Madame Puddifoot had left them. Harry saw the confetti on Cho's cheek and smiled. "Here, you've got..." he leaned over and brushed the glittering things away softly with his fingertips.

She blushed furiously and muttered 'thanks', looking down at the table. Harry became aware that Cho and himself were the only two people there who were not a couple. Looking around, he saw many pairs of hands being held, many lips touching, and felt very uncomfortable suddenly. He felt his cheeks getting hot as his gaze fell on Roger Davies, the captain of the Ravenclaw Quidditch team, who was leaning over to kiss his girlfriend, a pretty blonde girl. Harry snatched his eyes away and looked at Cho, who was watching him with a funny expression on her face. He cast about for something to say but the only thing that came tumbling out of his mouth was, "D-Do you know what time it is?"

Cho's expression changed and she looked down at her watch. "Ten past noon. Why?"

"I've got to meet Angelina and Hermione at the Three Broomsticks in a little bit."

"Oh." He thought he saw her face fall.

"You can come with me if you want. We can all have lunch together."

"Oh...okay then." She didn't seem very enthused about it. To his dismay, she turned and gazed over at Roger Davies and his girlfriend a bit enviously. Harry was glad when their coffee arrived. He tried to keep the conversation going; tried to drown out the faint kissing sounds starting to echo from the tables around them. He was painfully aware that last year he would've given anything to be snogging Cho Chang in this steamy little tea shop on Valentine's Day but he was determined not to think of that. It was in the past. He kept repeating this to himself as they talked about how horrible Umbridge was. It was last year. We're friends now, and I love Angelina. She has to know that, right?

Silence fell again as their abuse of Umbridge ran out of steam. Cho sipped from her coffee, her eyes flickering over to Roger Davies' table again. Harry sat up in his chair, having finished his coffee, and tried to look out the window, but it was all steamy from the warmth in the shop. He only had a few more minutes and then he had to go and meet Hermione and Angelina.

"So what are you and Angelina going to do today?"

"Er...I really haven't figured that out yet," Harry answered honestly. "I was supposed to be using the time she was practicing to think of something, but..." he trailed off, running a hand through his hair, and noticed too late that perhaps he shouldn't have phrased it that way.

"I'm sorry if I distracted you," Cho muttered.

"Oh, no, you didn't at all! I had fun looking around with you."

"Really?" her shining eyes widened hopefully.

"Yeah!"

"Me, too." She was very pretty. Her cheeks were so delicate, and when she blushed the color in them was a very nice rose tint. If only he had been able to get his courage up last year... "I like spending time with you, Harry."

"Thanks." Harry cleared his throat, really wishing that Roger and his girl would give it a rest already. Would Angelina want to sit in a place like this and snog for hours? Probably not. Knowing her, she would probably rather skip the confetti and tuck in his bed with the curtains drawn. He was unaware that he was smiling wickedly until Cho asked him what was funny. "Huh? Oh...I was just thinking about what you said to Pansy about Malfoy being off with another girl. Brilliant. Is that really true?"

Cho hesitated, then shook her head quickly. "I just made that up."

"Oh...well it was good. The look on her face was too much."

Another pause came, and Harry saw her hand lying on the table. It seemed dangerously close to his. To mask his need to separate them, Harry reached back and took hold of his empty coffee mug, looking down into it blankly.

"When do you think we'll learn Patronus Charms?" Cho whispered, leaning closer to him across the table. Harry looked around to make sure no one had heard her.

"Soon..."

"I'm really excited. Hermione told me yours is really brilliant."

"Yeah..."

"Harry you're such a good teacher." She was leaning a little closer to him than he would've liked, and he didn't really wish to be talking about the D.A. around so many people. He shrugged. "You are! Everyone thinks so."

"Your friend Marietta doesn't."

"Oh," Cho leaned back again, to his relief. "Well...I told you she's just going through some stuff."

"Like what?" Harry couldn't help being a little annoyed. "I doubt it's taking her this long to get over Zach Smith. She just doesn't like me, why don't you admit it?" He wasn't trying to be snappy with her, he just wanted her to stop making excuses for her friend and agree that yes Marietta hated Harry's guts and she didn't belong in the D.A. at all.

"What's your problem with her?" Cho asked, frowning at him. "She's not a bad person."

"She's the one with the problem, Cho. I mean, she's constantly late to..." he lowered his voice, leaning forward just as Cho had a moment ago. Their Cherub's wings buzzed, slightly covering his next words. "...she's constantly late to meetings and she gives me a hard time whenever I even speak to her!"

"She doesn't mean to. She's confused, all right? Her mother works at the Ministry and-and she feels guilty about being there."

"Then maybe she shouldn't be there."

"You can't just kick her out!"

"Why not? I'm the leader, and if I don't think someone is right for--"

"Harry, she's my best friend!" To his shock and confusion, Cho's eyes sprouted tears. He leaned back in his chair again, his mouth dropping open. The rain outside was still coming down pretty hard. There was silence again for a moment, in which there was nothing but the rain, the flapping Cherub's wings, and Roger's lips smacking against the pretty blonde girl's. "S-She's the only person I could talk to after Cedric..." she gave a watery heave of breath and the tears ran down her delicate cheeks.

Harry felt a lump develop in his throat. He had no idea how or why the conversation had turned in this direction. Cho was crying now, and many pairs of eyes turned toward them. Roger's girlfriend released his lips and raised an eyebrow at Harry. He blinked at her, trying to convey with his eyes that it wasn't his fault Cho was crying and she should go back to snogging her boyfriend and mind her own business.

"Cho...I'm sorry," he whispered, now taking her hand across the table. She sniffed and looked down at his thumb as it rested on hers.

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

She looked into his eyes. "Did...did Cedric...m-mention me at all before he...?"

The lump in Harry's throat doubled in size. She was staring at him beseechingly, her hand shaking slightly under his. Harry really wanted to be anywhere else but here right now, talking about

anything else. He remembered painfully how Snape pulled that memory out of his mind during their first Occlumency lesson. Cedric's hollow, dark eyes...staring at him...always staring at him...only not seeing. Harry swallowed the lump with difficulty and shook his head.

"There really wasn't time for that," he muttered. "Everything happened so fast and he was gone before I could--" She whimpered, choking back a sob. "Cho, listen--can't we just talk about something else?" he hated the desperate undertone in his voice.

"Why? Why can't we talk about Cedric? I-I need to, Harry! With you! Don't you need to?"

"I have. I've talked about it enough, with my friends. With Angelina--"

"Why can you talk about it with her, and not me? She's not the one who lost him!" She shouted this last, and now everyone had stopped what they were doing to peer over at them. That stupid blonde girl was looking at Harry as if he were the world's worst boyfriend. Except Cho was not his girlfriend and now he thanked Merlin he hadn't gotten together with her because if all she wanted to do was talk about Cedric when they were just hanging out, he could only imagine what being in a relationship with her would be like.

"Cho," Harry said firmly. "I don't want to talk about Cedric, okay? Can we go down to meet Hermione and Angelina now?"

"I'm not coming! You go ahead and talk to your girlfriend and that know-it-all Hermione Granger all you want!"

Cho threw some money on the table and stood up huffily, her lip quivering and her eyes still wet with tears. Harry watched her weave quickly through the tables. With a soft chiming sound from the bells hanging over the entrance, she had gone out into the rain, leaving him sitting there like an idiot.

Growling in frustration, he got up and likewise put money on the table. Swatting irritably at the Cherub who attempted to chuck another handful of confetti in his face, Harry tripped across the room through the tiny spaces between the tables full of staring people.

"Cho!" he shouted, rushing out into the cascade. He spotted her running down the street and sprinted after her, his feet splashing against the pavement as his clothes became drenched from collar to socks. He caught up with her and tugged her shoulder to get her to turn around and face him. "Hey, wait a second! What happened in there?"

"Just go away, Harry!" Cho sobbed. Her face was all shiny, with rain or tears he couldn't tell, and she was hugging herself. "Leave me alone! You're awful!"

He felt his sympathy and patience slip away and his temper flared up. "Have you ever seen a dead body?!" he shouted, his voice rising above the pounding rain and claps of thunder. Her mouth dropped open and she made to shake her head, but he continued. "No? I thought not—and pray you never have to-to watch someone die. Pray you never have to see it, because it is not something you can just sit around and chat about!"

"Harry, p-please stop yelling at me..." she melted into tears again but Harry was far beyond caring.

"I had only just been talking to him! He was standing right there, right next to me! They killed him right in front of me!" He was breathing so hard. His chest felt as if a cinder block was perched on it. His could hardly see, for the rain drove his hair into his eyes and his glasses were slick with the stuff.

"Oh no!" Cho wailed, actually covering her ears and stepping away from him. There were very few people out in the street, but those who were fleeing the weather for shelter slowed their steps, squinting over at them curiously.

"So you tell your friend Marietta that she should just get over whatever it is she's confused about. I know what's coming, and if she doesn't believe me that's her problem! She's got a stupid crush on Zach Smith? Big deal!"

"Oh, Harry it's more complicated than that!" Cho sobbed absurdly.
"She doesn't even like Zach anymore, she likes M--!"

She stopped talking abruptly and shook her head, her hands still over her ears. He started, taking a step toward her, but she turned and sprinted away down the street again. Harry stared after her, feeling very confused and more than a little upset. "What the fuck?!" he grumbled to himself in exasperation.

The afternoon had taken a very unexpected and dramatic turn. He had no energy left to devote to the rest of the day, he didn't think, and the rain did not seem to want to let up. Kicking angrily at a puddle, Harry shoved his hands in his pockets and began walking miserably in the opposite direction, headed for the Three Broomsticks.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Memory Lane Part One: Inside

Once again, he had acted foolishly and allowed his own desires to overcome rational thought.

But at least this time he had gotten a kiss. Warm, warm...she was so warm—burning, even. He desperately wanted some of that warmth for himself. He thought that she might respond to him this time; urgh, how incredibly weak and stupid of him! Of course, she did not. She pushed him away, as she had done before and would probably keep doing. Take the hint boy, his father would say. His father...his father did this to him.

He heard sloshing footsteps approaching and turned his head to see Montague running back into the tunnel. He hoped the others weren't following.

He didn't see them, and silently thanked Merlin for this. "We've started without y--!" Montague stopped yelling when he saw that Draco was sitting slumped against the wall. He shook his black hair free of the heavy rainwater and knelt next to the other boy, concern etched on his normally uncaring face. "What the hell happened, Malfoy? Did that bitch use her wand on you?"

"Help me up," Draco uttered stonily, ignoring the question.

Montague rolled his eyes and sighed hard, taking Draco's outstretched hand and pulling him to his feet. "I told you to leave her."

Draco closed his eyes for the thousandth time against another spasm in his body. "Montague..." he breathed. "I don't--I don't think I can practice...today..."

"Of course not." Montague scowled. "And how're we supposed to work on strategy without our Seeker?"

Draco opened his eyes and stared at him. "Can't you remember a goddamned thing you wrote in that book?"

"Mind your mouth there, fifth year. You know what I meant." The two boys regarded each other silently for a moment, the rain pounding and the faint sounds of the other team members' yelling echoing all around them against the stone walls of the tunnel. Draco sighed and leaned on his broomstick; he was feeling very weak now, very tired. "Listen, you should go to Snape," Montague saw Draco start to protest, but cut him off before he opened his mouth, "I know your dad would probably kill you, but you can hardly stand, Draco. Look at you! People are starting to ask questions. Just go to him, get some potions, and come back next practice looking less like a bloody ghost, all right?"

Draco didn't answer. Instead he turned around and began the journey back to the changing rooms. Montague watched Draco for a while, shaking his head at this pitiful mess that was walking stubbornly away from him.

"Go to Snape, Draco!" he shouted, his voice echoing.

No answer. His team was waiting. He turned his back on Draco and jogged back out onto the pitch, mounting his broom seconds after he touched grass and zooming away.

"Ron, wait!" Angelina struggled to catch up with him as he trudged up the soggy path leading to the castle. He kept going, his head down; the vibrant copper-red of his hair now muted as it hung limply in his face. She felt a lock of her own hair slap wetly into her mouth as she called out to him again, jogging forward until she was in step with him. "Hey—wait a minute."

He sighed and stopped walking, turning to her. His face was almost as white as Draco's. "What?"

"How..." she hesitated, her heart pounding, and pulled the lock of soaked hair out of her mouth. "H-How much did you see?"

"Enough." He looked very angry, and Angelina never thought she would actually feel ashamed to look into Ron Weasley's eyes. "It looked like—Angelina, it looked like was kissing you."

“You saw that?”

“Not the whole thing, but I’m not stupid.” His gaze was resentful. The rain beat down on them. Angelina shivered. “So you’re gonna tell me he put a body bind on you or something? Made you stand there and take it?”

“Wha--? No, Ron, you don’t understand--!”

“Or did you just see me coming and decide to push him off for appearances’ sake?”

Before Angelina could stop herself she had slapped him. His eyes widened with surprise and he stepped back from her, reaching up to rub his jaw. She instantly regretted it, and she could see as he narrowed his eyes at her that it only made things worse. “I-I’m sorry...” Ron said nothing, but simply turned and walked away. “Hey! Come back here!”

She caught up with him and forced him to stop again, jerking him back by the shoulder. “Piss off!” he snarled. “This whole time you’ve been telling us Malfoy tried to force you—stringing my best mate along like a chump, and you’ve really been double-crossing him with that slimy git!”

“That is not true! Think about what you’re saying to me! I would never do something like that!” Angelina felt hot tears mingling with the cold rain on her skin. “You don’t know me at all, Ron!”

“Yeah, well maybe I don’t wanna know you!”

“Oh stop being such a grumpy arsehole! Just because you’re afraid to get closer to Hermione, that doesn’t mean you have to go off accusing--!”

“Watch your mouth about me and Hermione, Angelina!” Ron stepped towards her threateningly, but she knew he wouldn’t hurt her. They glared at each other for a beat. He took a breath and said very calmly, “I’m going to tell Harry.”

“No!”

“No? Watch me.” He turned and began stomping away again. She dodged in front of him, blocking his path. “Get outta my way, Angelina, or I’ll--!”

“You’re not telling Harry anything, I am!” Angelina shuddered, staring at him imploringly through the rain. “I’m going to tell him the truth—and you’re going to keep your mouth shut because you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then what was that in the tunnel?” he bellowed, gesturing wildly back down to the pitch; water flying from his fingertips. “What the hell were you two doing?”

“H-He did kiss me—hey, listen!—but I didn’t want it, I didn’t ask for it, and I sure as hell didn’t enjoy it!” She had her hands pressed against his heaving chest now; he’d tried to stomp past her again when she admitted that Malfoy had kissed her. “He is not right in the head, Ron, there’s something terribly wrong with him...”

“What else is new?” Ron spat, angrily.

“Well, you saw him! His father’s been doing Merlin-knows-what to him and-and...”

“I don’t feel the slightest bit of sympathy for that fucking creep,” Ron told her through clenched teeth. “Why should you?”

“I don’t either. Listen to me, will you? I-I’m going to turn him in. Maybe someone can help him—he’s obviously mixed up.”

“Help him?” Ron gaped at her. She drew in her fingers on his chest as he tried again to side-step her. “I don’t want to help him; I want to see his knees broken! Who in their bloody right minds would want to help him after the shite he’s pulled?”

“He’ll be expelled. He’ll be sent away. I love Harry, but Ron, do you really want to see him gone just for sinking to Malfoy’s level?”

She was shaking slightly from the chill that her soaked clothing and hair brought upon her. Ron groaned and rolled his eyes, reaching up to brush her hands away. "Well, who will you go to then? Not sodding Umbridge?"

"No...n-not Umbridge."

"Who, then? McGonagall? She's on probation--"

"D-Dumbledore."

Ron blinked. "Who?" She didn't need to repeat herself. He stared at her for a long time. Then, his expression softening finally, he muttered, "You're shaking..."

"It's getting c-cold out here."

"When will you tell Harry?"

"I...I-I don't want to—it's Valentine's Day, and he probably--"

"All right, all right—but you are going to tell him?" he squinted at her. She nodded. "And...and when will you turn Malfoy in?"

"As soon as Dumbledore gets back from wherever he's gone to." Dumbledore had been gone since the morning they got the news about the Azkaban escape, no doubt to visit the Minister, or the prison itself. Ron looked wary of the idea of waiting, but she spoke before he got a chance to. "Please, understand Ron. Harry did what he had to do before and it was a miracle he didn't get caught and chucked out. Now I'm going to do this my way, all right? Malfoy will be gone soon enough."

Sighing heavily, Ron put an arm around her and began to guide her forward, back up the path. They jogged all the way down to the gate at the end of the carriageway, where Filch was standing with an umbrella floating above his head, holding the list of names ready. "What have ya got to do in the village with this weather on?" he grumbled testily as he checked their names off. "Go on, off with ya, yer little twits..."

As they jogged away from him, Ron's arm still draped around her shoulders, they caught sight of Cho Chang walking slowly towards them, hugging herself, her red skirt limply clinging to her legs. Angelina stopped and squinted through her wet eyelashes as the girl approached, and when she was closest to them she could hear crying.

"Cho? Hey, Cho, what's wrong?"

Cho stopped in front of them and looked from Ron's face to Angelina's before her lip quivered and she shook her head. "Oh, h-hi Angelina. Hi, Ron..." she tried a watery smile, but it failed.

"Why are you crying?" Ron asked, shaking some of his hair out of his face.

"Um...I-I'd just better get back up to the castle. I'm r-really cold." Cho gave Angelina a side-long look as she scurried past them, still hugging herself, and jogged back up the gravel path to the gate, where Filch was tapping his foot impatiently.

They walked quickly in silence down the High Street, headed for the Three Broomsticks, which was at the end. Before they went in, though, Ron turned to her. "Listen. I'm not going to say anything to Harry today, but if you don't tell'im--"

"I will. Ron, trust me, all right?" Angelina paused. "How do you know Draco's father put him under the Unforgivable Curse?"

Ron shrugged. "It just seemed like a good guess at the time. Harry's got a theory—I think he might be right."

"I think you're right, too..." Angelina muttered, her eyes narrowing in though. "He curled up on the floor like that when I pushed him. He's very weak, and I overheard Montague and him talking about it."

Ron considered her story before jerking his head towards the double doors of the pub. "Come on, let's go in," he sighed and shook his head. "Hermione's gonna be so disappointed in me..."

The atmosphere was a welcome change from the cold wetness they emerged from. The place was packed full of people—mostly students, but here and there a few Hogsmeaders could be seen eyeing everyone wearily. They caught their breath, and Ron tried to warm her by rubbing her arms rapidly. She thanked him and reached into her robes for her wand. After drying her hair with it, she dried his, and the two of them slopped across the room towards the bar, where Ron ordered two butterbeers from Madam Rosemerta. Angelina noticed that he was blushing furiously when he turned around to hand hers to her, but she said nothing.

“Angelina, Ron, over here!” Angelina gulped down a swig of beer and turned, frowning, to see Hermione waving to them from across the room. They dodged tables full of laughing students and weaved around groups of people walking up to the bar to get to where Hermione was. She was sitting at a table with Harry, Luna Lovegood, and a woman that looked vaguely familiar to Angelina, though she couldn’t quite remember where she’d seen her. The woman had frosty blonde hair and wore a hideous alligator skin raincoat that looked a bit on the ratty side. She had long, crimson red fingernails and a pair of winged, jeweled spectacles covering her icy blue eyes. She didn’t attempt to introduce herself to Ron or Angelina, but simply stared at them peevishly as if she would rather be lying in the middle of the street in the rain than sitting here amongst them.

“Hey, guys...” Harry greeted them, his voice sounding a little funny.

“Hi...” Angelina couldn’t help staring back at the woman as she slipped into the chair Ron had pulled up.

“What is she doing ‘ere?” Ron groaned at Hermione, apparently already having been acquainted with the woman. The woman clicked her tongue sharply and rolled her eyes.

“I’m not here by choice, you silly boy,” she snapped.

Hermione gave the woman a warning look, then turned to Ron again. “We were just finishing up.”

"Finishing what?" Angelina set her beer down on the table.

"I'm giving an interview," Harry said a bit unenthusiastically. "About what happened to me last year. About Voldemort's--" The woman jumped, startling Angelina, upon the sound of Voldemort's name. Harry rolled his eyes at her and continued. "When he came back, and killed Cedric..."

"Oh." Angelina and Ron exchanged glances.

"Hi, Angelina," Luna said suddenly, as if she had just noticed Angelina sitting there. "How was practice?"

"Um, fine, thanks Luna."

There was a pause, in which the woman rested her chin on her elbow on the table and regarded them all with the impatient air of a child waiting to escape her parents' boring company so she could go play. "Can we move this along, I don't have all day."

"Oh really, and where've you got to be off to, Rita?" Hermione asked, a knowing smirk on her face.

"That is none of your concern, Miss Prissy." The Rita woman (Angelina remembered, now! She used to write for the Daily Prophet! Nasty one, she was....) gritted, sneering and looking down at her parchment, where an acid green quill was perched on its own, ready to write. "Now..." she turned her attention back to Harry. "Where were we? Ah, yes...you were just about to tell me..." the quill was scratching across the parchment jerkily, taking down everything Rita said. "...about the moment that unfortunate Cedric Diggory boy bit the dust."

"Watch what you say about Cedric," Harry warned, his eyes narrowing at her. The Rita woman attempted an apologetic smile, but it came off as a leer. She muttered 'sorry' and Harry gave Hermione a despairing look before he shifted in his seat and sighed. "Um...Wormtail killed him. Voldemort ordered him to, and then before I knew it...."

They sat through Harry's interview for another twenty minutes. Angelina listened, unable to help herself from taking hold of his hand as he struggled through the part when Voldemort touched him and then put him under the Cruciatus. She could not have imagined he'd gone through so much, and listening to him tell it made her feel so awful about complaining because her stupid playbook had been stolen—all the things she found herself upset about seemed to pale in comparison to what Harry had been through.

The Rita woman had twice tried to question Angelina when she noticed that she and Harry had laced fingers under the table, but Hermione merely cleared her throat warningly and the woman sourly resumed taking down Harry's testimony.

After they'd finished the interview, Harry felt guilty and truthfully kind of sick. He pushed his butterbeer away and asked Hermione why he had agreed to do this.

"Because you know the truth needs to be told, Harry."

"Yeah, I know..." he was finding it a little hard to breathe. The sound of the rain outside the pub and the chattering voices of the many people around them were giving him a headache. Angelina held his hand under the table. "I-I just haven't talked about it like that since...since it happened, is all. I guess."

Hermione reached over and rubbed his shoulder comfortingly. "I know. I'm sorry. But this is the only way, Harry. Umbridge is trying to shut you up, she's backing you into a corner, and we just can't let her!"

He allowed Hermione to reassure him that it was the best defense they had against the Ministry's unrelenting efforts to keep him quiet about Voldemort. He could only imagine what people might say when he showed up on the cover of the Quibbler, an odd magazine that ran articles about things like Crumple-Horned Snorkacks and fugitive convicts really being retired singers in disguise. Hermione reminded him, however, that people all over were dissatisfied with the information (or lack thereof) that they'd received from the Daily

Prophet about the Death Eater escape and would be looking to other sources for a better explanation.

"Kids here at Hogwarts have been talking about it--you heard, Harry. They want more information, and they'll look for it. Even in slightly...out of the ordinary...magazines like Luna's Dad's." Hermione said politely, smiling at Luna. Luna sipped her gillywater and hummed 'Weasley is Our King' to herself quietly, not appearing to have heard Hermione at all.

When they had done talking about the Quibbler interview, Harry broached the subject of Cho. "I ran into her while I was waiting to meet you," he informed Angelina, observing that Ron was sitting slightly apart from Hermione with his chin in his hand. "We were just hanging out at first...then she started acting all weird..."

"We saw her," Angelina said sympathetically. "Ron and me, on our way here. She was crying."

"Yeah," Harry shook his head, adopting a guilty expression. "I-I kind of yelled at her."

"Harry that wasn't very nice. Why would you yell at her?" Hermione frowned at him sternly. "She seems like such a sweet girl."

"Sure she is, when she isn't getting mad at me for not wanting to talk about Cedric and throwing crying fits. I mean, she just brought it up out of nowhere. We were talking about that Marietta girl."

"Ugh, what's she gone and said about you now?" Ron groaned. "I say we take a vote. All those in favor of kicking Marietta Edgecombe out of the D.A.?" He stuck his arm straight up in the air. Hermione reached up and brought it back down to the table, patting his hand patiently.

"That's the thing, I would love to toss her out, but--" Hermione huffed disapprovingly and Harry lifted his hands in exasperation. "--well, come on Hermione, she's a pain! She manages to complain about every single thing I do, every meeting, and I dunno how much more I can tolerate."

"She's worse than that Zacharius Smith," Angelina agreed. "Even he's come around; last week he was the first to volunteer when Harry needed someone to be the target for our Stinging Hexes, remember?"

"Yes, yes, I suppose you're right." Hermione shook her head as if it were a shame. "Maybe we should take a vote on it at the next meeting, then." Ron smiled, obviously pleased that they were going to go with his idea.

Harry sighed. "I feel funny about that."

"Why? You just said--" Ron lost his smile.

"I know, I know, but Cho said something that makes me think maybe we shouldn't kick Marietta out. Her mum works at the Ministry, and Cho says she's been acting like this because she's confused about who to believe or whatever..."

"When the Quibbler comes out, she'll know you're telling the truth Harry." Luna joined the conversation for the first time, drawing somewhat surprised glances from them all. She swallowed the last of her gillywater and smiled airily. "Why don't you hold off voting until then? See if she comes around or not?"

Harry lifted his eyebrows thoughtfully. "That's not a bad idea, Luna."

"Mind you, Daddy's paper is very highly regarded for its attention to detail when it comes to research. He would never print a story that he weren't absolutely sure was authentic."

Harry nodded slowly, thinking that he doubted the authenticity of the existence of Crumple-Horned Snorkacks very highly.

"You shouldn't be so hard on Cho," Angelina said thoughtfully as they were getting ready to leave the Three Broomsticks. "She might've really loved Cedric. And you're the last person who saw him alive. She probably feels the two of you are connected because of that."

Harry closed his eyes briefly, muttering honestly, "That's really creepy and depressing..."

Angelina shrugged sympathetically and kissed him on the cheek. "I know. But maybe if you just talked to her? I mean, now that you've given the interview, do you think it would be easier for you to speak to Cho about it?"

Harry shook his head. "I doubt she'll even speak to me at all again, after the way I yelled at her. And when she sees I gave the interview today, she'll probably hate me for sharing it with Rita Skeeter when I wouldn't talk about it with her."

He asked, while they were waiting for Luna, who had gone to the loo, how Quidditch practice went. For some reason Angelina hesitated and her eyes drifted to Ron; who was still not standing very close to Hermione and who seemed lost in his own thoughts, though Harry got the strange feeling he was listening to Angelina as she spoke; before answering him. "Um...it was okay right up until all this started," she gestured to the pouring rain through the foggy windows and sighed. "We needed more time. But Slytherin--" Angelina stopped talking abruptly.

"What?" Harry frowned at her. "But Slytherin what?"

"They went out in it like it was nothing," Ron spoke up, looking very serious. "All except Malfoy. He's in a right foul state, he is."

"Oh yeah?" Harry smirked, bitterly satisfied with this news.

"Too sick to practice, or just too lazy to get wet?" Hermione asked.

"No, he's done for. I think you were right about his Dad training him up to be a Death Eater, Harry. I think..." he leaned in and so did Harry and Hermione. "I think he's been getting put under the Cruciatus."

Harry opened his mouth to ask what made Ron so sure, but just then Luna came back. The rain had slowed to a faint sprinkle when they stepped out of the pub, and Harry curled an arm around Angelina's

waist, pulling her close to him as they walked. Ron and Hermione were walking ahead of them. Ron had his head down, as usual.

"Was practice that bad?" Harry whispered, leaning in to Angelina while he eyed Ron. "He looks upset."

Angelina watched Ron, too. After a long pause, she shook her head. "It was just Malfoy," she offered quietly. "We saw him on our way out."

The foursome parted ways with Luna once inside the castle. When they reached the common room they found it nearly empty, except for Ginny and Dean, who were snogging on the hearthrug. Ron made a pained noise and covered his eyes as they pulled themselves apart from each other, both grinning apologetically. "Thomas, I'm gonna kill you!" Ron griped, still blinded by his own hand.

"Right, sorry. We'll just...go..." Dean did not look that sorry and neither did Ginny. Harry watched, somewhat bemused and a little impressed, as Ginny stood up, rolling her eyes at her brother, and took Dean's hand to pull him up with her.

"Come on, Dean. We can find an empty study room or something." She flashed Ron, who had opened his eyes to glare at Dean, a defiant look as he groaned and covered his ears.

"You wait till I tell Mum," Ron called after her as she led Dean through the portrait hole. "Ech! My little sister, it just isn't right."

"Oh grow up, Ron." Ginny called back.

Hermione watched them leave and then sat down on the couch, smiling serenely. "They're sweet," she observed as Ron lowered his hands from his ears and bounced down next to her. "You should be happy for Ginny, Ron."

"I'll be happy when she stops flaunting her boyfriends around me." Harry exchanged looks with Angelina and the two of them made their way around the couch towards the stairs to the boys' dorms. Ron saw

them moving and his eyes went wide, a funny expression developing on his freckled face. "Hey, where are you two going?"

"Upstairs..." Harry said matter-of-factly.

"But, er..." Oddly enough Ron looked rather apprehensive. "Um, I thought we were gonna talk about...you know Malfoy and stuff?"

Hermione frowned at him, a knowing look narrowing her eyes. "Ron, we can talk about that later. I haven't seen you all day..."

"I know." He didn't look at her, merely continued staring at Harry and Angelina as if, amazingly enough to Harry, pleading with them using his eyes to stay in the common room. "But this is kind of important, innit? Malfoy being a Death Eater. Right, Angelina?"

Harry turned to Angelina, who looked somewhat stunned like a deer caught in headlights for a split second. She turned her eyes from Ron to Harry and then back to Ron. Harry opened his mouth, really confused by this series of gestures from both his best friend and his girlfriend, but then Angelina spoke clearly, "Hermione's right, Ron. We can talk about that later." Then she smiled, her eyes flashing at the ginger-haired boy. "It's Valentine's Day, mate. Common room is only empty for so long...spend some time alone with your girlfriend."

"Or am I not capable of holding your interest by myself, Ronald?" Hermione's voice sounded dangerously offended, and she crossed her arms. Ron finally turned to look at her, and Harry took this as his cue to pull Angelina away slowly. They tiptoed backwards, both knowing full well what was about to happen, and when they reached the first step they turned and sprinted upward, away from the scene. As expected, Hermione's stern voice was rising steadily as she berated Ron, and he could be heard yelling back.

Last thing Harry heard was Ron's somewhat heated: "I am not afraid to be alone with you!"

They stifled their snickering with their hands until they had reached Harry's dorm. Neville was pulling on his cloak when they came in, and he turned to peer curiously over at them as they burst into full-

fledged laughter once the door was shut. Harry spotted Neville as he was wiping a tear from his eye. “Oh, hey Neville. What’re you up to?”

“Oh, well I thought I’d just...pop by the Room of Requirement by myself and practice some dueling stuff,” he answered guilelessly as he reached down to retrieve his wand from his nightstand. At Harry’s impressed look he blushed and averted his eyes. “Um I-I still haven’t quite gotten the hang of my magical center? T-thought I’d try some more of that meditation you taught us.”

“Brilliant.” Harry offered simply. He watched as Neville crossed the room, inclining his head at Angelina in passing, and opened the door. “Just be careful—Ron and Hermione are down there and I don’t think she’s pleased with him.”

“Or they could’ve gotten into some heavy-duty snogging in the heat of their argument,” Angelina added.

Neville blushed even deeper and muttered ‘cheers’ before leaving them alone. As soon as the door closed, Harry locked it and stepped closer to Angelina—like magnets their lips were pressed together in a soft, lengthy kiss. Their clothes were still damp. Angelina reached up and took hold of Harry’s collar, pulling the wet black shirt down his shoulders and arms until it fell to the floor. “I’m sorry...” Harry muttered, unable to help himself as he pulled away from the kiss and looked at her face. She was unbuttoning his jeans now. He kicked off his trainers.

“Why?”

Harry felt tingly all over as she let the jeans drop to his feet. He stepped out of them. “I didn’t get you anything. I spent the whole day with Cho. I’m sorry.”

“If anyone should be sorry,” Angelina tugged her Quidditch shirt over her head, dropping it to the floor. “It’s me. Quidditch practice was a waste of time with all this rain.” As if on cue, the rain picked up again and began drumming loudly against the windows. Angelina pulled down her pants and sat on the edge of Harry’s bed. He stared at her,

admiring her lean, curvy figure before kneeling and unlacing her boots for her.

"You can't predict the weather," Harry sat the boots next to his trunk, pulled her pants off all the way, and began hanging their wet clothes over the furnace rungs. Angelina stood up and hugged him from behind, her slightly moist skin sticking to his. She rested her chin over the crook of his neck.

"Harry," she whispered. "I don't care about the rain, or Cho, or you not getting me anything. I'm just glad we're together..."

Harry closed his eyes as she began to run her teeth over the sensitive skin on his neck. He exhaled slowly, feeling familiar, tingly warmth in certain places. Her hair brushed lightly against his arm and chest.

He was kind of anxious. It wasn't as if he feared they'd be interrupted again; it was still afternoon and despite the rain, he knew people would be taking advantage of their time in Hogsmeade to the fullest—even if that meant sloshing around down the streets getting soaked. It wasn't, either, that he feared letting go of the possibility that he was still a virgin, because in his opinion they hadn't really even gotten started last time. Harry was nervous because...well, this was real wasn't it? He had spent his day feeling all kinds of ways about his life—fear from the Azkaban breakout, resentfulness from Cho's demand for him to share his memories of Cedric, guilt from refusing her and then sharing them with Rita, and disappointment that the day hadn't gone as he'd planned—yet now all of that disappeared. He hadn't actually realized what they were doing as they undressed each other until this very moment, and now that this realization had hit home, he felt the weight of it falling down on him like the rain outside his window.

The only thing he wanted, the only thing he cared for in this moment was to be with Angelina. Be with her, close to her, inside her...

Harry turned around and looked into her eyes again. Angelina's expression mirrored his feelings. Though there was desire for him clearly shining in her soft brown eyes, he noticed that she was

shaking slightly. This time was completely opposite from their last encounter; there was a need to come together pushing at them hungrily in the dark of the common room then, but now...now Harry's curiosity, his apprehensiveness, and his desire for closeness and the comfort of her affection for him were all rolled into one and they thundered inside him quietly. He could see that Angelina was experiencing the same quiet storm. The rain hit the windows, tap tap tap...

Not taking her eyes from his, she slowly, agonizingly reached up and touched her bra straps. Giving a small, shuddering breath, her gaze so uncharacteristically bashful, Angelina slipped the straps off her shoulders: one, then the other. She reached behind herself and unclasped the garment, letting it fall to the floor. Harry's own breath caught and he held it, the heat in those familiar places pulsing, pounding just like the rain. The afternoon light fell on her round, soft breasts when she revealed them to him exquisitely. Harry's gaze dropped down to them and his eyelashes fluttered as he took in the small, dark areoles around her nipples.

Swallowing, Harry tore his eyes from her breasts as his mind flashed neon like the twins' fireworks: "you've just seen naked breasts, you've just seen naked breasts, this is it, this is happening!" He finally let out the breath he'd been holding as he whispered, "Angelina, you're so beautiful..."

Angelina smiled slowly, the nervous expression still firm on her beautiful face, as she reached down and took off her underwear for him. She was completely naked now. As Harry took all of her in, he felt an erection slowly forming beneath his boxers, and his mind attempted to guide him: Okay, he thought as his eyes roamed over her lithe body, stay calm. Just...this is no scarier than anything else you've done. You've beaten a bloody dragon before. You can do this.

She was looking at him apprehensively, now, and he could see a little area in her chest flittering madly—her heartbeat. He felt his own drumming pulse drowning out his thoughts. Gathering himself, Harry slowly pulled down his boxer shorts and stepped out of them. He understood exactly what she must've been feeling. He was now completely naked as well, very exposed, and his whole body felt on

fire just from her delicate, wide-eyed gaze. He saw her eyes travel the length of his body and then back up again where they rested on his erect member.

"Oh, Harry..." she breathed. He hoped that this 'oh Harry' meant that she was pleased with what she was saw there; though he could see it in her eyes and it made him burn with an odd feeling--possibly pride.

Harry swallowed again, his temples and cheeks very hot. Angelina's hand came up, and he watched her step closer to him. He closed his eyes and seconds later he could feel her cool fingers on him, tracing down the length of his ebony happy trail until they reached the hard on that was growing more and more pronounced (and painful) with each second. Her fingertips very lightly brushed his sensitive flesh, and it sent a powerful wave of feeling through him like a chill, only much better. He folded his lips and muttered, "Hm..." quietly before leaning forward again and kissing her.

Their skin touched in tiny places; a point on their thighs, his happy trail brushed against her hip, their toes met, and then the tip of Harry's throbbing cock sank into Angelina's v-shaped, downy muff for just a second. She moaned quietly and pulled him by the hips towards his bed. Harry barely had time to process this—she touched him, they kissed, now they were moving to his bed and the recognition of these actions were all wrapped up in a raging ball of yearning.

They slipped under the covers awkwardly, their young bodies eager to come together again. He was naked and she was naked and he wanted to laugh but that did not seem very appropriate. Harry was vaguely aware of the afternoon sky, still grayish but bright enough to cast shadows down into his sheets that caught certain curves on Angelina's body beautifully. He breathed in deeply, so anxious but hesitant for some reason. He wanted to get it right this time...weeks and weeks of longing to be inside her was finally culminating here on a rainy Valentine's Day afternoon. He almost didn't want to let it go, but he could feel her soft nipples rubbing against his skin; feel their breath mingling; feel the soft tickle of her brush against his as he hovered over her; the ideas he had for what he would do when this

moment arrived vanished from his mind and all he had left was the desire.

Angelina smiled seductively. "Are you ready?" He had positioned himself on top of her. He nodded slowly, nestling between her legs, his forearms supporting his upper body on either side of her. She stroked his back soothingly, her fingers tracing the jagged scar that sloped along his shoulder blade. Harry closed his eyes, then pushed himself gently inside and felt the damp, hot, silken flesh slide inch by agonizingly pleasurable inch up his shaft as it sank into her. Harry let out a noise similar to the one he'd voiced his first time experiencing this wonderful sensation, gripping the mattress. Angelina was breathing softly, her nipples pressing against him and then falling away. "Kiss me, Harry..."

Hazily, his eyes still closed, he obeyed. They kissed several times and then Harry felt a little stuck for what to do next. After a slight pause, Angelina opened her legs wider and he sank down further inside her, almost swooning from the pleasure. Instinctively, finally, he began to move. This was a good idea. Angelina took hold of his bottom, squeezing it firmly, causing him to groan and bury his face in her neck as she helped him pick up his pace. After several deep, slow thrusts he opened his eyes to look at her face. She was biting her bottom lip, wincing a bit, and despite the overwhelming need to sink ever deeper inside her Harry paused. "Am I hurting you?" he whispered, furrowing his brow with concern.

She shook her head. "No..." He pushed further and she moaned.

"Are you sure?" he breathed, slightly alarmed at the look on her face. She looked as if she wanted to cry. "Angelina...what's wrong?"

"Nothing...mmm...keep going." Angelina leaned up and kissed him intensely several times before pulling him fully on top of her. He felt her hands on his bum again and seconds later they were moving together, each flux sending eddies of pleasure rippling through him from the tip of the head inside her to the back of his pelvis. He slipped one hand down to grasp her thigh, only to bring her even closer to him if possible. He lost all capacity for thought, forgot his nerves and fear; he forgot about Umbridge, Voldemort, Ron, Quidditch,

Occlumency, and that bloody corridor in the Department of Mysteries. He forgot about Malfoy. He concentrated on what he was feeling...

Angelina moaned and kissed him, bit his neck gently, ran her hands through his hair. Harry grunted and moved faster, deeper, intense heat pulling him and a tingly numbness beginning to develop in the small of his back. He didn't think about what was happening; it felt so good and it was growing more powerful with each thrust. He heard her steady "oh...hmmm..." in his ear, heard the raindrops hitting the glass, felt the tingling become more intense as he stroked over and over again—the topmost ridge of his cock rubbing hot against her swollen clit every single time. The tingle spread upward and downward, so warm. Crept up his spine and down into his thighs. After a moment he could no longer feel his hips. Harry was beginning to panic, but he was unable to stop—for his mind was growing numb like his hips.

They were breathing and sweating and their skin stuck together before being peeled apart again as Harry moved faster; needing desperately to keep going—it was so close! He groaned salaciously with the effort while relishing the feel of Angelina's delicate hands clinging to him—her fingers digging into the meat of his hips and back drove this need forward fiercely. She was growing wetter and wetter, her thighs quivering, her breathing becoming erratic. Harry was almost there...all thought lost to him...nothing apparent but the agonizing threshold of pleasure...and then almost painfully a blinding crescendo of ecstasy hit him all over. "Urghmmmm..." he grunted, sucking in his breath as all of the muscles in his back, thighs, and even his toes contracted at once. He tried to keep moving, wave after wave of it crashing into his senses. And he felt her clawing at him too, her own climax shuddering through her violently, which in turn pushed him past the point of tolerable pleasure. He simply let it wash over him, losing himself inside her until everything came to a breathless halt.

When he came to, he was sweating and trembling slightly. Angelina was cradling him to her chest, her breasts rising and falling deeply as he lay there limply on top of her. Harry knew for certain now that he was no longer a virgin. Tiredly, he lifted his head and looked at her. "Are you okay?" he breathed.

"Oh yes. Are you?"

"Yeah. I feel pretty damned good..." he grinned lazily, now becoming aware that there was something very slimy on his skin down there. "I think you made me..." he lifted himself up slightly, looking down but not being able to see under the covers. He gently pulled himself out and away, and the stuff oozed out everywhere. He made a face. "Gross."

Angelina burst into a fit of laughter. Harry looked up at her, feeling slightly embarrassed.

"I didn't know it would be...this...messy." He was attempting to slide to the edge of the bed without touching his skin to the sheets, but it wasn't working very well. Angelina stopped her giggling and helped him by holding the covers up so he could ease out of them. Harry tiptoed, his back hunched and his legs spread slightly, knees bent, over to the furnace. He poked through his jeans pockets and found his wand. Making another face, Harry Scourgified the mess from himself and then handed his wand to Angelina.

When they were cleaned up, they sat on the edge of the bed, side by side, naked as newborns.

"Well..." Angelina said after a beat. She leaned closer to him and kissed him tenderly on the lips. "We're no longer virgins."

Harry frowned. "You were...?"

She made a face at him and nodded. "Well, yeah silly."

"Oh."

"You thought I had sex before?" Harry couldn't help offering her a wry smile as he gestured yes. "Harry! Why'd you think that?"

"Um, well you're just so...I dunno you just always seem so cool about everything. There were a few times there that I got the feeling you

knew exactly what you were doing—which is more than I can say for myself.”

“Well, that doesn’t mean I’ve had sex before.”

“So what you’re saying, then,” his smile turned playfully haughty and he lifted an eyebrow at her, “is that I brought out your trashy side, because I’m so irresistible, right?” She pushed him backward on the bed and straddled him, reaching her slender fingers into the ticklish spots under his armpits and just under his navel. He twisted and writhed around as she tickled him. He was trying in vain to pull her roaming hands away when she suddenly stopped her tickling and gasped, a delighted expression on her face. “What?” he sat up on his elbows.

“I’ve just had a really great idea!” Angelina looked down at him, her eyes shining. “Let’s take a shower together!”

Harry’s mouth dropped open. “What?” Before he could protest any further she had jumped off of him and pulled him up from the bed. “Angelina...” he groaned as she threw his towel at him and fished through his trunk for a spare. “I dunno about this...”

“I’m dirty, you’re dirty, and we’re together at the moment so why not kill two birds with one stone?”

Harry felt a little overwhelmed. For goodness sake he had only just pulled off having real sex for the first time, now she wanted him to bathe with her? Nonetheless he allowed her to lead him by the hand towards the door, where she unlocked it and opened it a sliver, peering through to see if anyone was in the hall.

“Which way is the boys’ showers?” she whispered, turning back to him with her hair half-covering her right eye. He took in a breath, realizing he would follow her wherever she wanted to go, and muttered “...to the left,” hoarsely. Angelina wrapped herself in his towel and motioned that he do the same. He held up a finger, turned and fished his Invisibility Cloak out from under his mattress, and draped it over both of them. Together they snuck out of the dorm and hurried down the corridor, past several other dorms towards the boys’

showers at the far end. Harry was petrified that someone would come walking down the hall and bump into them but there was no one there. They passed Lee, Fred, and George's room, where he could faintly hear excited, loud talking and strange noises.

I'd never hear the end of it if one of those two knobs saw us out here in nothing but towels, he thought to himself as they hurried around the corner and slipped in through the door to the showers.

They could hear water running, and Harry counted at least two occupied stalls. He licked his lips nervously as he followed Angelina's tip-toe pattern quickly down to the far end of the room, where they slipped into a stall near the windows. He hung his cloak on a hook by the stall and Angelina beamed at him as they drew the shower curtain closed and stood there with each other, face to face.

He was rather nervous. He really did not fancy the idea of anyone catching them in there together.

"Take this off..." she whispered, reaching for his towel. Harry allowed her to remove it. She took off her own towel. Once again he was confronted with her naked body, standing so close to his, in the tiny space of the shower stall. To keep himself from staring at her, he reached over and turned on the water. The gentle, hot spray came down on them, driving their hair into their eyes and running slippery paths over their bodies. The little space steamed up and so did the lenses on Harry's glasses. Angelina took them off of him and put them on herself. He inched a little closer to her so that he could see her face better. She looked really silly in his spectacles. He whispered this aloud. "You look really silly in those."

"Thanks," she whispered back. Angelina pushed them down to the brim of her nose and peered at him over the tops of the wire frames. "This is fun," she said simply.

They worked in silence, both taking turns lathering the sponge and washing each other down. Harry closed his eyes and allowed Angelina to glide the sponge along his back and legs in slow, soapy circles. It soothed and relaxed him. She washed his chest, thighs, and bum off all with the slightly exploratory air of the youngsters they

both were. Harry could not help himself from watching her kneel before him—it was a rather attractive sight. He took his turn too, having to gather some nerve before attempting to do the same to her. As he washed, he took in everything he saw—made note of every detail of her body. Strong, yet delicate shoulders that curved gracefully, long lean legs, and a beautiful arch in her collar bone. Her breasts had little tiny goosebumps on them around the nipples that seemed to grow in definition when his hand or face got near them.

After a while he became aware that the showers were empty but for them, and the sun was now shining through the large, amber-tinted windows. The soft, warm light drifted in and fell on the room, reflected beautifully off the steam all around them. They were now simply standing very close to each other, the water still falling warmly on them. Harry just watched her watching him, feeling so good about himself.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked very softly. He watched her lips move.

“You...” he answered truthfully. Her slender fingers played with his happy trail. Harry blinked sleepily. “Thinking about that first time you kissed me. In the Room of Requirement, ‘member?”

“Uh huh...” her eyes shone in the golden light. The rain stopped tapping the windows completely and the sun grew brighter as the clouds parted. “You were so young...”

“It was only last year,” he said as though he were offended.

“Yeah but you’ve changed so much since then. And you’ve been through...a great deal more haven’t you?”

Harry held her in a loose embrace, the steamy water curling down his spine, lulling him so he almost swayed on his feet. The tips of his hair touched his eyelashes. “I suppose so. But...if I’ve changed at all I think it’s mostly because of you.”

“Why? What have I done? Besides give you a headache...”

“Angelina...”

“No, no...Harry...” and she took a deep breath, letting it out in a small stream. “I’ve been acting really stupid, especially about this whole Malfoy thing.” Harry felt a little resistant to the idea of bringing up Malfoy, but he said nothing, watching her as she spoke to him. “I did all the wrong things. I let it get out of hand, instead of doing the sensible thing in the first place.”

“What’s the sensible thing?” he asked quietly, carefully.

“I’m going to go to the headmaster when he gets back.” Angelina answered gravely, after a pause. The sunlight illuminated her now serious face almost ethereally. “I want to handle it quietly, but I know I can trust Dumbledore, just like you all do. What do you think?”

Harry paused, considering her words to him. He did trust Dumbledore, immensely. Hermione was right, as was everyone else who told him lately: the headmaster had never led Harry astray in the past. He had always, whether blatantly or else when Harry thought he was alone, been there for the boy. With the possible exception of Professor McGonagall, who would more than likely be involved in some form or fashion, he could not think of a single other person that he would want Angelina to confide in. This year’s somewhat confusing distance and vagueness from the headmaster aside, Harry was confident with Angelina’s choice.

“I think if it’s what you want, then Dumbledore is the person to tell.”

“Really?”

“Yeah...only...” Harry frowned, trying to figure how to phrase his next question. “Why’ve you decided now, after all this time?”

Angelina hesitated before answering him, during which there was only the sound of the running water and the birds chirping outside the windows. “I just think...I think that kid needs help.” Harry made to roll his eyes at her, but she stayed him, saying before he could groan with annoyance: “Harry, I don’t like him any more than you do. But have you seen him lately? I mean really looked at him?”

"Angelina—I've been put under the Cruciatus, too. It hurts." Harry said flatly, with a hint of annoyance.

Angelina sighed, some water running over her top lip and into her mouth. She blinked under the torrent and her eyes flickered at him patiently. "I-I know. I didn't mean to dismiss what you've been through, or even that you should feel sorry for him."

"Then what do you plan to do?"

"I just want him to be held responsible for what he did. And maybe if I draw a little attention to him, you know, maybe they'll see something's really wrong, and they can help him?"

Harry was beginning to feel as if this so-called 'payback' was really just a pity party in disguise. He opened his mouth to respond to her, but just then felt the desire to discuss this any further leave him. He didn't want to talk about Draco Malfoy's weird crush on his girlfriend while they were taking a shower together. He had had enough of that stupid boy for the time being, thank you. All the stuff about becoming a Death Eater and being tortured by his father—it was all kind of angering and Harry fancied he would deal with it when he wasn't naked and wet. He only sighed and kissed her. "Do you want me to come with you? To Dumbledore?"

Angelina considered briefly, then shook her head. "No. I think I'd better go on my own."

"Okay..." That settled, Harry put Malfoy to the back of his mind. Something occurred to him and he grinned. "You know, he saw those little love-bites you gave me..."

Angelina made a face. "Really?"

"Yep. He even told Madame Pomfrey to give me a potion to get rid of them!" Harry laughed. "It was really embarrassing—Fred and George saw."

Angelina kissed him and whispered, "Well I couldn't help myself...you're irresistible." Harry grinned at her in that 'aw shucks' way. She chuckled and kissed him several times on the mouth, hugging him to her. He would always savor the sensation of their naked bodies pressed together, however briefly, under the running water. He became aroused very suddenly. Angelina laughed again. "Oh, and look who's popped up to say hello!" she crooned at his privates, causing his cheeks to turn scarlet despite his huge grin.

"Yes, he's...standing at attention, little lad." Harry played along, laughing at himself, feeling ridiculous, but loving the attention she was paying him as she ran her fingers through the curly patch of black hair lining his abdomen under this bellybutton.

"He's anything but little," Angelina said seriously and Harry felt that surge of pride attack him viciously again before he kissed her.

Chapter Thirty: Memory Lane Part Two: The Power

'I have wasted months on fruitless schemes...but no matter. We start again, anew.'

Harry awoke in a cold sweat.

It was almost three in the morning. His scar was throbbing awfully and he had that sick feeling in his chest and throat again. Shaking slightly, he held his hands in front of him, in the moonlight, convinced that he would not see his own--but the freakishly long, white fingers of Voldemort.

'Send Avery to me...' the cold, terrifying voice had come out of Harry's mouth in the dream.

Harry looked around the dorm room nervously, half expecting Voldemort to be lurking in the shadows somewhere, watching him with those inhuman red eyes. Voldemort was not there—he was in that fire-lit room from Harry's dream waiting for that Rookwood fellow to bring him Avery, and...Harry's scar seared with pain and he knew that Avery was in big trouble.

When his gaze landed on Ron's bed, he was startled to find that Ron was awake, staring at him.

"You were talking in your sleep again," Ron sat up slowly and leaned forward to rest his arms on his knees. He gazed over at Harry solemnly, his eyes glinting in the moonlight coming through the windows, "...only that didn't sound like you."

"No..." Harry breathed, shaking slightly. "It wasn't me." He paused. "It was Voldemort." Ron swallowed thickly upon hearing the name. Harry let his gaze fall from his friend's face and stared down at his own hands again. "I-I was Voldemort."

"What do you mean by that, Harry?" uttered Ron forbiddingly; though Harry was sure he knew perfectly well what he meant.

"I mean..." Harry glanced around again to make sure the others were asleep. He suddenly felt hot and swung his legs over the edge, pulling the covers back and leaning over to rest his aching head in his trembling, clammy hands. "...that I was Voldemort. I was inside his body, talking to Rookwood. I was thanking him for telling me that Avery was giving me all the wrong information."

"Who is Rookwood?" Ron almost whispered, staring at Harry's bowed head.

"He's one of the escaped Death Eaters, remember?" Harry answered tiredly. "He told me that Bode couldn't have done it...that Avery should have known he couldn't have..."

"Done what?"

Harry lifted his head impatiently, knowing that Ron didn't have a clue what he was talking about but only feeling frustrated, bordering on angry. "Removed something. 'It', he kept saying 'it', whatever it is—he wants it; I've been after it for months and now he's furious because he has to start all over again!"

Dean jerked awake and peered over at Harry's back sleepily before dropping his head to his pillow again. Seconds later they heard him resume his soft snoring. Harry hadn't meant to raise his voice. He felt sick still, like the slime of being in Voldemort's body was seeping through his pores, poisoning him. He swallowed back a thick lump of extra saliva and lowered his throbbing head to his hands again.

"You said 'I'..." Ron spoke quietly after a long while of silence.

"Huh?" Harry looked up again sharply.

Ron hesitated but took a short breath and repeated: "You said 'I' a minute ago. When you were talking about You-Know-Who. You said... 'I've been after it for months.' "

The two boys stared at each other. Ron was looking at Harry in a way that made his insides run cold. There was something wrong with him...he felt utterly contaminated now. He could only feel the burn in

his scar, know that Avery was somewhere being punished, and sit on his bed with the very strong belief that what he'd just experienced was not a dream at all.

"Harry?" Ron spoke up again.

"Yeah?"

"You should tell Dumbledore..."

Harry didn't answer. Instead he leaned back again in bed, slowly tucking his legs under the covers. He lay flat on his back and sighed deeply. Soon he heard the springs in Ron's mattress creak, meaning that he was returning to bed too. Harry lay there awake for a long time, staring at the ceiling of his canopy. Dumbledore, it seemed, would be getting an earful when he finally returned from wherever it was he had gone to.

"I don't think telling Dumbledore is a good idea," Hermione said at once the next day.

They were standing in the courtyard during their free period, under a particularly bright patch of sunlight. Harry squinted at Hermione through his glasses. "Why?" both he and Ron asked in unison.

He had told Hermione every detail of the dream he'd had, including the fact that he himself was Voldemort, or in Voldemort's body or however one chose to look at it. She had deduced, rather quickly, that whatever it was Bode tried to 'remove' had landed him in St. Mungo's unable to speak, but that to cover their backs, Voldemort's Death Eaters had murdered him. It was obvious that now Rookwood was going to tell Voldemort how to remove this thing (the weapon, they knew) from the Department of Mysteries; avoiding whatever spell it possessed to curse those who touched it. Harry had been rather excited to be unraveling the clues, and was keen to pass on the information to the Order, but Hermione had just popped his balloon.

"You weren't supposed to have seen that at all, Harry." Hermione answered a bit severely.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Hermione, if I weren't seeing these things, we wouldn't know half the stuff we do. I wouldn't have known about Mr. Weasley and he could be--!" he stopped abruptly, noticing Ron's eyes shrink with uneasiness. Sighing, Harry started over. "Look, what I saw last night is important. It could help."

"But, Harry Dumbledore doesn't want you having these dreams--!" Hermione tried again.

"They're not dreams!" Harry snapped. "They're real."

"Fine. But the fact still remains that you are supposed to be practicing Occlumency to shut them out for good reason."

"Oh yeah?" Harry asked evenly, crossing his arms. "And what reason is there? Dumbledore hasn't told me a bloody thing, and all Snape does is yell at me. No one has explained to me what's so dangerous about being able to tell what Voldemort is up to."

"Well, he does have a point about my Dad, Hermione." Ron cut in before Hermione could retort. He shrugged at her forbidding look and blew a lock of hair out of his face, his brow creasing thoughtfully. "I mean, what if You-Know-Who tries to hurt someone else? Someone close to us again?"

"I just..." Hermione seemed exasperated, but determined. "I just don't think we should go against Dumbledore's wishes. And besides that...these dreams or visions or whatever they are...they seem dangerous to me, Harry. They hurt you, and you change when you have them—you're not yourself."

Harry's eyes flickered up and down at her; he was ready to keep arguing but just then allowed room for what she was saying. He did feel...agitated...after he'd had the Rookwood dream. Also he remembered his outburst in the Room of Requirement that time—and that horrible, mad laughter that escaped him the night of his first Occlumency lesson. But most of all he remembered Malfoy nearly two weeks before...the blind desire to hurt him...and keep hurting him...

He knew that Occlumency was important, but some part of him was defiantly resisting what Dumbledore wanted. Some part of him wanted nothing more than to open his mind even further to his connection with Voldemort, and prove to everybody (especially the headmaster) that the Order needed him, that he was important after all, and that leaving him out didn't help their cause. Dumbledore had no right to shut him out, ignore him, not look at him, shoo him away when he wanted to help. He wasn't just a kid. He could do things, he saw things and knew things that they didn't...if he could just make them all see that.

This part of him was particularly whiney and arrogant.

The other part realized that Hermione was probably right. It was afraid of this connection with old Voldy, and did feel very vulnerable whenever he experienced it. Needless to say, the two parts of him were at war with each other.

"Harry?" Hermione spoke quietly, interrupting his thoughts. She gazed at him, her brown eyes filled with concern. "You must work hard at Occlumency. You've just got to find a way to close off your mind from Voldemort."

"I can't." Harry almost whispered. "I've been trying. Snape is bloody awful; all he does is call me names." Harry leaned in, lowering his voice even more. "I feel really strange, Hermione. Like my mind is everywhere at once. I can hardly concentrate on anything, let alone close it off. It's gotten worse after...you know...what happened."

She knew what he was referring to, and she touched his arm fretfully. "Harry don't you see? That is all the more reason to take your lessons very seriously!"

"But Hermione, you said it was just Harry's emotional magic that was acting up last week," Ron offered in Harry's defense. Harry fancied he saw a bit of guilt flicker in the ginger haired boy's blue eyes but said nothing. "That doesn't have anything to do with You-Know-Who or mastering Occlumency, does it?"

"I know what I said," Hermione shook her head, frowning at them both. "But I've been thinking...and it seems awfully like the more open your mind is, the less you can control certain things...you're very vulnerable right now Harry. You must realize that."

"That thing with Malfoy was a fluke. I've never done anything like that before," said Harry defensively. "And I still say that me being 'vulnerable' has more to do with stupid Snape and Occlumency than it does with me being angry enough to strangle that git for what he did to Ange--!"

"Think, Harry!" Hermione snapped urgently, cutting him off. "Try something, use anything, like..." she looked around at nothing in particular, presumably trying to think of something herself. "...w-well what about what you learned in those dueling books? That meditation stuff? You're really good at that, and you've taught us all how to do it, right?"

"Yeah, but--"

"Hang on a minute, Harry, that's not a bad idea." Ron piped up. "I mean, maybe finding your magical center is sorta like what you need to do for Occlumency. Maybe if you do that every night before you go to bed you won't have visions."

"But what about during the lessons?" Harry asked with still lingering stubbornness, despite himself.

The courtyard was filling with students—today was a fine day. February had come and gone, and it was now mid-March. Harry had an Occlumency lesson in two days. The rain hadn't shown its face in a while; today the sun was out, though the temperature was still pretty cool. Harry glanced around at his fellow students. Fred and George were at the opposite side of the courtyard, headless, calling gleefully for students to come one, come all. Almost everyone else seemed to be talking cheerfully, but for the trio standing in their usual spot near a small chestnut tree. Harry was flanked by Ron and Hermione, who were both looking at him grimly. His own face was drawn with aggravation.

"How am I supposed to find stillness and quiet while Snape is shouting at me? He barely gives me a chance to do anything before he starts in with the 'close your mind, Potter, you're not trying hard enough' blah blah blah..." Harry muttered bitterly.

"You've done it before, remember?" Hermione answered him, referring to what he'd told them about doing the meditation in Umbridge's office during detention.

"That was different..." Harry responded thoughtfully. That time had been strange, and completely unexpected. Truthfully, he didn't know what had happened. He suspected that it had been, in a way, the start of some of the things he'd been experiencing since then. He had chalked it up to the fact that he hadn't had his wand in hand to filter the power he felt. Still...something way down in the depths of his mind said very faintly that perhaps he should not dismiss that occurrence so quickly.

"So you'll do it before you go down to the dungeons for your lessons, then." Ron suggested. "That way you'll be focused, and just like if you were in a duel, you can defend yourself more easily."

Harry looked doubtful.

"It's worth a try," said Hermione imploringly. "Please, Harry."

"Why are you pushing this on me?" Harry asked abruptly, trying to quell his temper. "Aren't you the slightest bit upset that they aren't including us? Don't you think we have just as much a right to know these things as the adults do?" He said 'adults' with thinly-veiled bitterness and by 'they' he really meant Dumbledore.

He looked from Hermione to Ron. Ron looked as if he agreed with Harry, but he said nothing.

Hermione sighed. Somewhere a bell was tolling, signaling the end of their free period. The bell echoed loudly once more before she spoke again. "I'm scared for you...for what's happening to you. These visions...they get worse each time you have one. And there's more to it than that now. What happened...Harry it just wasn't normal. I think

Dumbledore is right. It's time to put a stop to all of this. I'm sorry but that's how I feel."

Reaching out for Ron's hand, Hermione led him away from Harry without another word. Ron looked back at him sympathetically, his eyes saying 'I'm with you mate, but she has a point'. He watched them go feeling a little abandoned. He had a reason to feel such detachment from everyone else.

Things had started out fine enough, but then rapidly began to change. At first they were good things that lifted Harry's spirits. But then strange things started happening, beginning with that one particular detention in Umbridge's office.

And then he'd found out...so he went for Malfoy...and now Harry had to admit that he was just as afraid as Hermione.

Harry had been on a cloud the entire week following Valentine's Day. Nothing bothered him. Not his horrible Potions and D.A.D.A. classes. Not the increasingly brutal Occlumency lessons he endured. Nor the fact that Cho had gone back to not speaking to him for a while or that Marietta's temperament still hadn't improved during their meetings. He found himself filled with seemingly limitless patience and a renewed enthusiasm for their dueling sessions. Fred and George were getting really good, as was Ron and Dean, and Ginny. Hermione, of course, performed excellently but she was always reluctant to put Ron in harm's way, despite Harry's assurances that he wouldn't let anyone get hurt. Angelina was very impressive, and unlike Hermione, she had no problem hitting him with everything she had. He felt he had his best opponent in her, though Neville became so good at focusing his energy that he defeated his opponents with fewer and fewer moves each time. The only person he had not been successful at besting as swiftly was Harry. The D.A. met three times before the Quibbler interview came out, and when it did, Neville walked right up to him in the middle of breakfast while Harry and the others read through the many letters people had sent to him, and said seriously, "I'm glad you did this, Harry." Harry smiled humbly and Neville went on to say, in a quiet but steady voice: "Luna gave me a copy earlier and I'm gonna read the whole thing again right now. But I just wanted you to know...I think it's really brave of you... telling the truth like that. I wish I could..."he trailed off.

"Thanks a lot, Neville," Harry said tentatively, understanding what the other boy meant. "But you don't have to--"

"Yes I do." Everyone had stopped their reading and was looking up at him now, and he blushed a little, but continued determinedly. "I-I don't talk about them much, mum and dad, but seeing this...it just makes me feel really good about what we're doing." His cheeks burned even deeper as he looked at them all looking at him. "Thanks. I just wanted to say thanks."

"Er...you're welcome." Harry didn't really know what else to say. Neville seemed satisfied with that, though, and he walked out of the Great Hall with his back a little straighter and his head held slightly higher.

"Balls and garters," Ron whispered when he had gone. "That was the most I've heard Neville say in months."

"I thought it was really sweet," said Angelina, kissing Harry on the cheek quickly and reaching for another letter. "You see? I told you-- people see something in you Harry. You're a natural leader. You've gotten Neville to come out of his shell."

"No, that was Hermione's handy work," Harry responded, squinting at a letter from a witch in Surrey who was scolding him for going against the Ministry. "If she hadn't set up the interview--"

"What's going on here?" came a syrupy voice from behind him, cutting him off. Harry turned, just as every pair of eyes at the table with him slowly moved upward towards their new visitor, and saw Delores Umbridge standing over him, smiling that fake smile of hers. "What are all these?" she swept her beady eyes over the table littered with letters before turning her gaze to Harry again.

"We're not allowed mail anymore?" Fred quipped. "Is that a crime now, too?"

"Careful, Weasley..." Umbridge sang in warning, her eyes not leaving Harry's. "I'll have no back talk from you. Potter? I asked you, what are all of these letters?"

"They're letters for me." Harry answered calmly, though his heart was beating very fast. He felt Angelina's hand on his leg as he stared up at Umbridge, whose smile seemed to be painted onto her round face. Her eyes however...Harry felt a daring need to see if he could make the evil gleam in her eyes grow deeper—he felt an urge to make her so angry that her eyes exploded with that fire he could see faintly glowing back at him from those beady pits in her skull.

"And why..." she purred dangerously, "...are you receiving so many letters, Mister Potter?"

"I gave an interview. Last Hogsmeade weekend." The truth swept from his mouth without any effort at all. He was not afraid of her, he was excited to see what she would say, what she could possibly do—he handed her his copy of the Quibbler. "Here."

She took it, her eyes moving slowly from his to the paper. He watched her stare down at the front page, where a picture of him blinked back at her. Above his head, the headline read:

HARRY POTTER SPEAKS:

"THE NIGHT I SAW HE-WHO-MUST-NOT-BE-NAMED RETURN!"

The Boy Who Lived tells all in an exclusive interview: a Death Eater's infiltration of Hogwarts, the Ministry's efforts to silence him, and the night he saw his fellow student, Cedric Diggory, die at the hands of You-Know-Who...

Everyone sitting around Harry—Angelina, Fred, Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Dean, Seamus, and Luna —remained completely silent as they watched Umbridge read over the headline. Her breathing began to slowly and steadily grow faster, her cheeks turned from pink to bright red, and her eyes narrowed beyond mere slits. Harry saw her crush the paper slightly in her trembling hands before she folded it harshly and glared at him. "So..." she said very quietly, in her most

dangerously saccharine voice. “I see you have not learned your lesson about telling lies, then, Potter?”

“You mean I haven’t learned to keep my mouth shut like you and Fudge want me to?” Harry corrected her boldly, his voice still very calm. Angelina squeezed his thigh, but he ignored her and continued staring at Umbridge. “No, I guess not.”

“How dare you!” Umbridge squeaked, furious. “How dare you...you little...” she looked as if she wanted to strike him, but closed her eyes briefly, taking a deep, zen-like breath. Her smile appeared again, curling upward to the enchanted ceiling. “Very well Mister Potter. There will be no more Hogsmeade trips for you. Fifty points from Gryffindor and, I think, you could do with another week’s worth of detentions.” Harry didn’t flinch. “Clean up this mess at once and be off to class, all of you.”

When she had gone, Harry felt a cold wave wash over him and he let out the breath he hadn’t been aware he was holding. Now everyone was staring at him apprehensively. All except Fred, who looked rather amused and impressed. “That was wicked, mate!” he exclaimed.

“Thanks...I think.” Harry whispered, staring at the table. He let what he had just done sink in, along with the fact that he would be serving detention with Delores Umbridge again.

Like clockwork, another decree went up before the day was even over. It banned any student from possessing a copy of the Quibbler, stating that punishment would be expulsion, no exceptions. Hermione seemed oddly pleased with this, and when Harry asked her what the hell was so great about it she explained that by banning the Quibbler, Umbridge had ironically ensured that everyone in school would read it.

And indeed she was right. Harry was baffled by the aftermath of the decree—kids everywhere seemed to know every detail of his interview; some even quoting his own words back to him eagerly as they bombarded him with questions and comments. But there was nary a corner of the paper to be found when Umbridge and Filch did random searches. Everywhere Harry went, he was met with favor—teachers awarded him points for the smallest things out of nowhere,

gazes on him were curious and approving rather than malicious or disdainful, and he was a hero in Gryffindor Tower. The twins had even held a little party in his honor, with a large poster of the front page of the Quibbler overlooking the proceedings. Harry's large head turned to and fro from the poster; he grinned proudly at his peers while proclaiming that everyone at the Ministry was a "bunch of idiots" and that Umbridge should "eat dung". They lounged around, drinking butterbeer and laughing at Umbridge for hours—Dean and Seamus read from the article for everyone's amusement. Dean was Harry while Seamus hilariously mimicked Rita Skeeter.

"'When I asked him how it made him feel to have everyone think him a liar and a trouble-maker,'" Seamus sang in a terrible impersonation of a female voice, "'young mister Potter simply said...'"

Dean cleared his throat and put on his best Harry voice, causing Harry to scrunch up his face even as he laughed at his friend. "'How would you feel?'" Everyone whooped and cheered at Dean's deep, over-serious tone.

"Do I really sound like that?" Harry asked Angelina, who simply smiled and kissed him softly on the mouth.

"Well he's still a trouble-maker," George piped up proudly from his leaning position against the window sill next to Alicia Spinnet. He drew his arm from around her neck and performed a lewd fist-underhand gesture, causing the boys to guffaw and the girls to gasp indignantly. "Gave old Umbridge a piece of his mind, didn't he?"

"I'd of done you one better and told her to shove her detention up her fat arse, Harry." Fred added.

After a while Ron and Hermione, who had finally ironed out whatever their snag had been (Harry suspected that it had to do with Ron's intimacy issues), gave up trying to snuggle on the couch when Harry's enormous head looked down at Hermione and told her to eat dung.

"I'm proud of you..." Angelina whispered to Harry when they were saying goodnight.

"I love you," he answered. It almost seemed a little too perfect, the scene: Ron gave Hermione a warm hug and kiss on the mouth before whishing her goodnight just as Harry and Angelina embraced. The two couples split up—girls going one way, boys going the other. As Harry and Ron made their way up to their dorm, they each enjoyed their own self-satisfied silence.

"You know..." Ron said to Harry as he was tugging off his shoes whilst Seamus, Neville, and Dean messed about noisily in the background, "it seems like when 'Mione and I fight, it sort of makes things better when we make up. She hasn't nagged me once since our last row." He made a thoughtful, yet cheery noise and tossed his shoes to the side. Harry nodded his agreement as he was pulling off his shirt. "What's that saying?" the freckled boy wondered. "'Conflict makes the heart grow fonder' or some'fin like that?"

"Er—I think that's 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' Ron." Harry tossed Seamus back the Fanged Frisbee that had landed on his pillow.

"Well you get my point."

"Yeah...it's the same for me and Angelina." Harry grinned, his mind wondering to a delicious little memory of one of their many make-out sessions. "I love making up with her."

"Yeahr I'll bet..." Ron rolled his eyes, shaking his head as he began to undress. Harry hadn't told him about what happened Valentine's afternoon, but Ron had undoubtedly noticed his best mate's attitude lately. Like he had told Angelina in the rain--he wasn't stupid. Speaking of which--Harry didn't notice, for he was busy taking off his glasses so he could get into bed, but Ron's face changed suddenly. When he spoke next, his voice was more serious; quieter. "Harry?"

"Huh?" Harry scratched his bare chest and slid under the covers.

Ron glanced around to make sure that neither Neville, Dean, nor Seamus were paying attention before continuing. He stood over Harry, his arm half-way out of his shirt, his sleeping socks in one

hand. "Well, I was just wondering...I mean it's none of my business, but..."

Harry grinned, thinking that Ron was about to ask him a question related to sex or something of that nature, but upon seeing the rather serious look on his friend's face, he tilted his head curiously. "What's in the bean, Ron?"

Ron stared at him for a long time, seemingly debating something with himself. Harry actually reached over and put his glasses back on again.

"What is it?"

"I wanted to know about Malfoy," Ron rushed the statement, swallowing thickly. "I-I wanted to know if you...were still angry at all. Cause it doesn't seem like you are..."

"I can't be all steamed up forever. I almost got expelled trying to duel with him, and besides..." Harry frowned. "Angelina told me she was going to turn him in—I mean I wish we didn't have to wait till Dumbledore gets back, but I promised her I'd let her handle it on her own."

Harry sighed and sat up in bed. Ron sat next to him, his arm still hanging out of his shirt. He rolled the socks around in his palms, his head lowered as he stared at them. "That's what she told you?"

"Yeah..." Harry's chest tightened at Ron's tone. He blinked slowly, feeling a bit apprehensive. "Why? Do you think I should do something? I've been thinking about getting hold of that playbook and passing out copies of his little love poems or whatever," Harry rambled bitterly. "Then he'll know what it's like to have the whole school laughing at him--"

"I mean is that all she told you?" Ron interrupted, looking up at Harry sharply.

Harry narrowed his eyes at him. "Ron, what are you on about?"

A pause. "Nothing..." he got up from the bed and crossed over to his own, his back to Harry. After a moment he turned around again and Harry could see the effort he was making to sound casual. "So, where d'you reckon Dumbledore's gone off to this time?"

"Don't change the subject, Ron." Harry warned. "What did you mean by 'is that all she told me'?"

"I mean, did she say why she's all of a sudden decided to go to Dumbledore?" Ron asked somewhat heatedly. Harry glanced around at the other boys—they were climbing into bed, muttering their 'goodnights' to each other.

"She just admitted that she'd gone about dealing with it the wrong way," Harry explained carefully, his eyes narrowed as he attempted to read where Ron's agitation had come from. "Ron, what is your problem?"

"You're my best mate, Harry," Ron said simply. "And I like Angelina a lot, but..."

"What is that supposed to--?"

"Just watch your back around that git, all right? You saw how he reacted to the article..." he was referring to the fact that Harry had named Malfoy's father (along with the fathers of some of his fellow Slytherin mates) as a Death Eater in the Quibbler interview.

"Yeahr I saw."

Malfoy had been furious, and though he could not say anything about the matter for fear of expulsion for having read the article, Harry knew that the boy wanted to kill him for calling his family out so boldly. Among his companions in this outrage were Crabbe, Goyle, Montague, Nott, and a few other dour-looking boys.

"So do you think for a second he's gonna sit back and let you accuse his family of being a bunch of Death Eaters?"

"What's that got to do with Angelina?"

Ron looked at Harry as if he were mad, and for the first time in the conversation Harry saw real turmoil going on behind those blue eyes. "He fancies her, Harry! He's already tried to have his way with her--!"

"Keep your voice down!" Harry hissed, not wishing at all to be discussing this matter within earshot of their other roommates. He got out of bed and walked up to Ron. They stood close and Harry tried to make himself clear without sounding too angry, for he knew Ron was only looking out for him. "Look—I know who Malfoy thinks he is. He as much confessed that his father and all his Death Eater friends were after my head. I'm not afraid of him."

Ron shook his head slowly, looking as if he really wanted to say more, but he did not. They went to bed that night far from chummy. Harry only thought it extremely disconcerting that the energy between them had changed so drastically in a matter of minutes. He didn't want to think that Ron was jealous of his relationship with Angelina—that was absurd! And not only that, but it would simply be too much for Harry...he had enough on his plate without having to deal with something so preposterous.

Why is he acting like that? Harry asked himself as he drifted off to a restless night of sleep. For Ron seemed not only upset about the way Harry was dealing with Malfoy (or not dealing with him, it sounded), but at Angelina as well. Harry could not think of anything Angelina could have done to make Ron speak resentfully of her—except maybe...pushing him so hard at Quidditch? But Ron wasn't like that, was he? Harry reasoned that the ginger-haired boy had been very moody over the last few months.

He drifted off, still puzzling, and the next thing he knew he was standing in front of the door to the Department of Mysteries again. And again, it would not budge...

I will not tell lies.

Harry grimaced at the parchment, his hand aching awfully and sweat springing to the surface of his hairline as he wrote the sentence out as slowly and carefully as he dared. Somewhere behind him

Umbridge was polishing her awful plates with the frolicking kittens, and his Firebolt was chained up miserably.

I will not tell lies.

He was almost finished. There were only a few more lines to go. He had remained silent this whole time, not wishing to give her the satisfaction of hearing him voice his pain in any way. She seemed very pleased to have him back in her office tonight, however, and she hummed cheerfully whilst Harry maimed himself. Taking a deep, silent breath, Harry touched the enchanted quill to the parchment again just as she finished polishing the biggest and most gauche plate in the room. He only had a few more lines to go...just a few more and it would be over...

“You know, Potter...” she simpered, making her way around the desk to begin on a new set of girly baubles on the shelf near the window, “it occurred to me only recently—after you so boldly disrespected me in the Great Hall—that perhaps you simply don’t know any better.” She tittered to herself as she picked up a pink teapot. “I mean, being raised by Muggles as you were.”

Harry spared her one acerbic look before returning to his lines, but said nothing.

I will not tell lies.

“Muggles lack refinement—tact. They lack the language of simple courtesy and dignity. Well...” she laughed again. “Not all of them I suppose, but those I myself have come in contact with failed to impress me, I must say.”

I will not tell lies.

Harry closed his eyes on the last ‘lies’; for the skin on his hand was so tender by now that the cuts just ravaged it like toilet paper, and he was bleeding awfully. He had half a mind to smear his blood all across those plates she’d just finished polishing. He glanced up at her and saw that she was admiring her own reflection in the pink teapot.

"Yes, yes, so you see it occurred to me that you being raised by Muggles...well it's a wonder your academic aptitude isn't even lower than it already is." A snort. Harry grimaced again from the pain, trying to block out the sound of her voice. It sort of echoed out at him, however, along with his own mind's voice sounding out the lines he was carving into himself. I will not tell lies... "Well, let's be honest—you're doing very poorly in my class of course. And Professor Snape tells me that you're taking remedial Potions this term? Tsk, tsk, how can you hope to do even averagely on your O.W.L. exams?" ...I will not tell lies... "It's no secret that McGonagall woman favors you—she is after all in Dumbledore's corner. But I suspect you aren't doing as well as she would like to pretend you are in Transfiguration, are you?" I...will...not...tell...lies...

Harry's hand moved, but his mind retreated. He thought back to what he'd read in *Dueling Through the Ages*. Umbridge was jabbering on, but he figured if he could just concentrate hard enough...

"As for your brutish, rather uncouth behavior--well I can only suspect that the people who raised you..."

He found, with difficulty, some form of stillness. His mind slowly became dark and blank. He found silence. Harry breathed, his eyes closed, as his hand moved. Slowly...in and out...in and out...breathe, Harry. It seemed like it was taking him forever, but soon the pain in his hand throbbed, then dulled, then faded. Umbridge's voice grew fainter and fainter. Harry breathed. He felt the tremble of his own magic within him...felt his wand hand (which was also his writing hand) grow warm, and the warmth spread up to his arm. He was beginning to feel better. For the peace and quiet and stillness was upon him, floating down over his body like an invisible blanket. He didn't even know if his hand was still moving, but he did not care. He had taught this to all the members of the D.A. but it seemed that only Neville took it seriously. Now he was in a space where there was no sound at all. No images in his mind. Nothing but himself, and the magic coursing through him; his heart beating phonically in his ears.

He lingered there for an indeterminable amount of time...

Then Harry felt himself coming back to reality, very slowly at first, and his only thought was that he did not want to go back and listen to that horrible woman's voice. He did not want to go back to the pain. He resisted, but it was no use. He was coming down. His hand trembled. Harry felt the pain coming back, and soon the darkness was fading.

Harry felt his hair settling back down on his head, as if he'd just landed from flight, only it did so very slowly.

He opened his eyes to see Umbridge standing with the teapot clutched to her plump bosom, staring at him wide-eyed and silent. She looked pale and alarmed. Harry was confused. He looked around. The kittens had stopped moving in their plates. The office was still and silent but for the slow tick-tock of the clock on her wall.

Umbridge stared at him.

"How long...?" he tried to think of a way to phrase the question.
"What...just...happened?"

"Nothing whatsoever." Umbridge swallowed, loosened her grip on the teapot, and cleared her throat. She did not look at him as she turned and placed the pot back on its shelf. Gradually, almost tentatively, the kittens surrounding him began to play again. "I think that will do for tonight, Mister Potter, you may go."

Harry looked down at his parchment. He was mid-sentence and he still had about a dozen more lines to go. He looked back up at Umbridge, who was now watching him carefully; her beady eyes were significantly wider than usual, and glinting with what Harry thought was fear. Not wishing to argue the point at all, Harry gladly stood and gathered his things. He took notice of the tiny jump she gave when he moved, but he did not say anything else to her as he turned his back on her. He threw his bag and robe over his shoulder and left the office.

As he walked, he puzzled over what he had just done. He'd been teaching this exercise to the D.A. for months, ever since he learned it for his duel, but he had never before experienced it like that. Usually he would simply perform a spell that would release the power he built

up through his wand, but tonight he did not have a wand. Tonight...where had the power gone?

Harry hurried along, taking the steps two at a time, until he reached Gryffindor Tower. He had to find Hermione or Ron or Angelina. He had to tell someone. Umbridge acted as if he were truly afraid of him for the first time since they'd met, and he couldn't figure out what he had done to make her react to him like that. It seemed to him that he'd only been sitting there...

"Hippocampus..." he spoke the newest password to the fat lady and just as she was swinging forward to admit him, he heard raised voices coming from the common room. He recognized Ron's and there was a familiar female voice trying to cut into him but failing...Harry knew that Ron and Hermione were at it again. He was determined, however, to interrupt their love spat in order to share his news...but he was stopped in his tracks.

"Angelina, you promised me you'd tell Harry!" Ron shouted.

They were standing near the stairs—it looked as if Ron had been waiting for her to come down from the girls' dorms and when she did he'd ambushed her. Ron had his back to the portrait hole, and was looking up at Angelina, who was standing on the last step very close to him. He seemed to have barred her from moving past him. She was glaring at him—neither of them noticed that Harry was lurking by the curtain that hung as a divider between the common room and the short corridor to the fat lady's portrait.

"Let me pass, Ron."

"No. Not until you tell me what the bloody hell you're playing at."

"I'm not playing at anything! I told Harry that I'm going to Dumbledore about M--"

"I'm not talking about that and you know it..." Ron's voice dropped low, and sounded dangerous. Harry strained to hear what the red-head said next, but his eyes remained on Angelina's face, which was stricken with what looked like the need for Ron to just drop whatever

it was he was on about. "I'm talking about why. You told me that if I didn't say anything about Malfoy kissing you, you'd tell Harry yourself. It's been weeks, and last night I asked him..."

Harry didn't hear anymore. He had the familiar sensation of his world tipping slowly and heavily. He might have even sagged against the stone wall of the little corridor for a second. The curtain fell in his face, blocking his vision of the two of them...Harry breathed on it and it fluttered. Angelina appeared and then was gone again...appeared and then was gone...along with the back of Ron's copper top. The white noise seemed to have taken over right about the moment Ron said 'Malfoy kissing you'.

Taking in his breath, Harry straightened himself and stepped away from the curtain. He made it to the couch. Angelina was mid-sentence when she saw him standing there, staring at the two of them.

"I don't want to talk about this here. Can't we just--?"

She clamped her mouth shut and seconds later Ron had spun around...Harry heard nothing but the white waves of fury rolling through his mind, blurring his vision with each swell. They both gaped at him; Ron looking pale but solemn while Angelina simply looked as though she would give anything in the world for Harry to not be standing there at that moment.

"I thought you had detention still?" Ron whispered lamely.

Harry didn't hear him. His eyes were glued to Angelina's face and the white noise rolled. When he spoke, his voice echoed phonically in his own ears, as though he were under water.

"You...you kissed Malfoy?"

"No..." Harry titled his head at her threateningly. "I mean...he kissed me. In the tunnel...at...at Quidditch practice..."

"Quidditch practice..." Harry repeated mechanically. "You mean...Valentine's Day?" He felt sick suddenly. "The day we--?"

"Harry, mate, it wasn't like how you think." Ron stepped forward, raising his hands a little to settle Harry. Ginny was coming down the stairs above them, talking casually to Pavarti Patil. The two of them stopped in their tracks and stared down at the scene. Harry heeded none of this. He rounded on Ron.

"And you didn't tell me?" He could not tell how loud he was speaking, but he must've been shouting because all three girls jumped and Ron closed his eyes briefly. "My best mate, right? My friend?"

"I wanted to..." was all Ron would say as he clenched his jaw. "But--" Harry cut him off, turning to Angelina again.

"He kissed you. He kissed you?" He just couldn't understand it. Malfoy kissed her? On Valentine's Day? The day they'd made love? And she kept it from him?

"I didn't want to tell you then. I-I thought if I waited for Dumbledore..."

"Harry," Ginny spoke quietly from her position a few steps above Angelina. "Calm down. You shouldn't go off the handle again--"

"SHUT UP!" Harry bellowed to the room at large. "I don't want to hear it!"

The thing that happened in Umbridge's office faded away like Fred and George's trick ink and Harry felt his insides begin to burn. He was so angry that he could hardly see, but just as confusion and chaos struck him, a single thought pierced these emotions cleanly. Malfoy.

He wanted—no he needed to find Malfoy now—right now.

Harry dropped his school things and turned around sharply, headed for the portrait hole. He could vaguely feel them all on his heels, they were probably calling his name, but he did not care. The white noise rolled over him in electric waves—he only had to get to Malfoy.

Curfew was in ten minutes. Kids were still milling about the halls, heading back to their respective common rooms. His hand had begun

to drip with blood again as he walked, but he didn't notice. Harry saw Hermione walking towards him with Neville from the library as he descended a set of stairs with Ron, Angelina, and Ginny still close on his heels calling for him to stop and listen to them. He barely looked at her as he rushed past.

"Harry, what's--?" her mouth hung open in shock as he passed her by, and he heard Ron mutter for her to go back to the common room and pretend she hadn't seen. Of course, she refused to. So Harry got two more D.A. members chasing after him as he descended stair after stair, singularly focused on getting to the rat with the blond hair.

The halls were curiously absent of teachers. Not even Filch could be found lurking about. Harry would have thought this extremely lucky if he weren't so enraged—the powers that be had blessed him to seize his target undisturbed.

They hissed at him "you'll be expelled!", "please don't do anything crazy!", "Harry stop and think about this for a minute!" All things he had heard before. All things that no longer seemed to matter. He felt betrayed. Stupid. Soooo naïve and clumsy to have allowed himself to be strung along, oblivious and love-struck. What a sap he'd been! What a fucking twat!

Oh I love Angelina, she's so wonderful, Malfoy's just jealous...wah wah wah...

Just thinking of it made him boil with contempt. That pansy-arsed, brick-headed prat thought he could touch Harry's girlfriend again? AGAIN?! Kissed her...kissed her? After Harry had warned him—after sparing him from expulsion!

They reached the dungeons. Wary of Snape or wandering Slytherins, Harry slowed his steps. Angelina and Hermione caught up with him and were now flanking him on either side, both looking extremely frightened.

"Harry, please..." Angelina whispered.

"Be quiet," he warned, peering around a corner. When he saw the coast was clear he moved on. Hermione said something but Harry paid her no attention. It was only Ron, jogging up and stepping around to block him from advancing towards the Slytherin common room entrance, who managed to stay Harry temporarily.

"What are you gonna do?" Ron asked quietly, though not in a way that might've suggested he was prepared to stop his friend. It was perhaps this tone that allowed Harry to answer him calmly without yelling.

"I don't know. Get out of my way Ron."

Ron did not move, and Harry was on the point of moving him physically but the other boy lifted his chin toward something over his shoulder. Harry turned around to see what Ron was looking at. As if on cue—as if the powers that be were delivering him to Harry's waiting hands—Malfoy was there, strolling down the corridor behind them. He slowed his steps as his pale blue eyes landed on one face after the other and he halted when they found Harry's. He had been coming from the curtained-off stone stairwell that led down into the kitchens. The black curtains fluttered somewhat and a shadow moved, but all of them were focused on Malfoy, who looked tense.

"What are all of you Gryffintwits doing down here?" His gaze shifted back to Ron, then Hermione, then Angelina. Angelina opened her mouth, but closed it again as Harry stepped forward. Draco began to move forward again as well, his head lowering as he walked towards them seemingly without a care. He shoved past them, not looking at Harry directly, and continued on to the suit of armor guarding the Slytherin common room entrance. "You'd all better clear off, before I tell Snape you're down here after curfew. He's in his office down the hall, you know. Not very wise coming down to start trouble--"

"Didn't I tell you..." Harry spoke quietly, distancing himself from the watching crowd and drawing his wand from his pocket. Malfoy had his back to them, but Harry could see without the benefit of looking into the other boy's eyes that he was scared, and that he had been bluffing about Snape. But Harry didn't care much about that at this point. "...not to put your hands on Angelina again?"

Malfoy turned around slowly; and as he did he reached into the folds of his robes and clasped his hand around his own wand. "What are you blabbering on about Potty?" he asked, his voice cracking. Harry's eyes flashed.

"Oh no please don't do this..." He couldn't discern which of the three girls had spoken: Ginny, Angelina, or Hermione. He ignored it.

"I told you—not—to touch—Angelina—again." He was amazed at how calm his voice sounded, for there was a volcano rumbling around inside him. His fist tightened around his wand, it was only waiting for the right moment. He took another step forward.

"Oh did you?" The boy's eyes flickered to Angelina's face and back. "And what makes you think I'd even want to touch your blood-traitor girlfriend again, Potter?

"I saw you Malfoy!" Ron piped up angrily.

Harry barely moved, but Draco started warily at the sound of the other boy's voice. He sneered at Ron. "You don't know what you saw, Weaselbee."

Ron stepped forward abruptly and before Malfoy could get his wand out of his robes, he'd been shoved to the ground. "You ruddy liar!" Ron spat, just as Hermione and Angelina rushed forth to pull him away. Malfoy slipped and slid to get his footing again, still fumbling for his wand, but now Harry was standing over him. "He forced her, Harry! He pinned her against the wall and forced her to kiss him!" Ron was shouting, but Harry's hearing shut off. There came the white noise again, louder and more blinding than ever. Ron's words fixed themselves to Harry's mind's eye. And he saw nothing but the image of Draco forcing Angelina to kiss him.

There was no sound but the steady hummm, hummm, as the fury rolled through him like an electric current.

And he acted. His wand lifted up, his mouth moved—he uttered a spell and Malfoy's body went rigid as a board. Harry spoke again (his

vision whiting in and out, hummm, hummm...) and this time Malfoy flew up against the wall, sticking there like an insect to fly paper. Harry's wand arm trembled and his brow creased very slightly. He felt all movement around him cease, heard nothing, saw nothing but Malfoy.

Draco's eyes were going wide, his face growing very pale, then red, then gradually turning a sickly shade of blue. He was choking. Harry watched, slightly detached, as Malfoy kicked and sputtered, still pinned against the wall.

Hermione appeared at Malfoy's feet, then Angelina and Neville. They were speaking. Their mouths moved, but Harry couldn't hear them. Malfoy looked very weak in the face, and Harry knew that he couldn't breathe. He simply didn't care. Draco was choking, and his kicking and sputtering was slowing down, his eyes rolling back slightly into his head. Hermione and Angelina were trying to tug him down, and then Angelina gave up, turning to Harry. She was yelling at him. Hummm, hummm...she grabbed him, shook him. He felt his wand fall out of his hand but Malfoy was still pinned against the wall, still choking. Now Ron was in front of him, followed by Neville. Then Hermione. Wands were raised; streaks of yellow light came at him. He didn't heed those either, and Malfoy remained where he was, turning bluer in the face with each second that passed.

Desperately, Ginny reached up, reared her fist back, and in one straight shot she punched Harry in the jaw.

He fell to the stone floor, the white noise faded, and all sound and feeling came rushing back to him very quickly. Malfoy hit the floor as well, and he took in a huge, rasping breath, his back curving up like a cat. He sounded like a dying beast, gulping in mouthful after mouthful of air.

Harry glared up at them. Hermione still had her wand aimed. She was breathing hard and her eyes were fixed on his—she looked scared to death.

"Someone's behind that curtain!" said Neville urgently, pointing to the direction Malfoy had come from earlier.

"Oh, no, they must've seen us!" Hermione hissed. "Harry, please let's get out of here, now!"

Harry scrambled up from the floor, but instead of heading back around the corner that would lead them up to the grand entrance hall, he hurtled himself towards Draco. Before all five of them seized him and pulled him back, he'd gotten in two or three swift, hard kicks to the Slytherin boy's abdomen. Malfoy moaned awfully and curled up into the fetal position, saliva oozing out of his mouth.

Harry's friends roughly pulled him back, and he resisted for a moment, needing to go and kick his enemy several more times. Angelina held him the strongest. "Harry stop it! Stop!"

"Get off me!" he ordered them, shaking his arms from their clutching hands viciously. He scooped up his wand and glared at the boy coughing weakly on the floor. "You'd better be glad they're here, Malfoy," he snarled. "Next time I'll kill you!"

"It's done mate, let's go..." Ron whispered.

Harry was breathing like a troll, but he heard the curtain flutter behind them. Whoever it was that was hiding in there, they weren't going to come out, or they'd already run off. It was just as well. He turned, not looking at anyone (especially not Angelina—or Ginny for that matter), and stalked away back down the corridor.

They all hurried back out to the entrance hall. Harry kept his head down as he walked. He expected any moment that Snape or Filch or someone would pop out of the shadows to stop him but no one came. Everyone remained silent. They all climbed the stairs to their floor and Harry did not remember who said the password, nor did he see the fat lady's stern look as she let them pass. He kept his head down.

When they stepped into the common room, Harry kept walking, only pausing to gather his bag and cloak where he'd dropped them before continuing on to the stairs leading up to the boys' dorms. Perhaps the faint sound behind him was Angelina parting her lips (the lips that Draco Malfoy had kissed) to utter his name, but he no more heeded

this than he did the fact that he would surely be expelled come morning.

Dean and Seamus were messing about with the Headless Hats they'd bought off Fred and George; bouncing on Seamus' bed and guffawing loudly. They tried to greet him when he emerged, but he kept his head down until he reached his bed, where he drew the curtains closed and threw himself onto the mattress. The boys fell silent for a moment, but then probably out of respect for his wish to fume alone, resumed their screwing around.

Harry lay there, on his back, staring up at the ceiling of his canopy.

He only thought that he could have gone on hurting Draco over and over if they all hadn't followed him down there. And if he had...well maybe he and Sirius could swap stories of life in Azkaban in a few years.

Miraculously, Harry had not been expelled.

In fact, there wasn't the slightest whisper of what happened.

It was bitterly ironic—all his friends' chirping at Harry not to sink to Malfoy's level, not to put himself in the position to be kicked out of school—he'd almost killed the other boy. Not a word from any teacher. Not a word from Draco. And come to think of it, whoever was hiding behind that curtain obviously had not come forward. There wasn't a word from him or her either—yet.

Harry knew that Hermione had taken Ron away and left the courtyard ahead of him in order to allow him to think over what she'd said. He hadn't told them that he had, in fact, already thought about using his dueling exercises with Occlumency. But that faint little voice in his head did not seem to like the coincidence that the night he'd managed it during Umbridge's last detention was also the night he'd almost strangled Malfoy to death without his wand.

Sighing, Harry pushed his bag up on his shoulder and began to make his way across the courtyard as well. Fred and George suddenly sprouted heads again and waved to him as they poured their

Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts into their homemade leather profit purse. They had been beside themselves when Harry and Ron grimly gave them the details of the Malfoy incident the day after.

“We missed it?” the boys had chimed dramatically. “We missed it?”

“Shush!” Ron rolled his eyes at them. “You wanna clue in the whole Tower? Keep your voices down, will you?”

Harry merely sat dejectedly in an armchair, staring at his Chucks. It was after dinner and Harry had not spoken to Angelina all day. He had started the morning out not speaking to Ron, either, but soon gave up when Ron cornered him after breakfast and explained that he’d been on Harry’s side of things the whole time. He’d only been trying to allow Angelina to do the right thing on her own. It seemed reasonable enough to Harry, though he felt his heart clench at the realization of the fact that she hadn’t in the end. He’d accepted Ron’s apology.

The twins ate up Ron’s story, and they attempted to rouse Harry to celebrate with them but he simply shrugged. “Ohh, come on Potter!” Fred rejoiced. “I’ll bet you were brilliant! Wandless magic? What fifth year do you know can do that? And you...with the...pinning him...” Fred and George mimed the details of the incident together—Fred pretended to shove George to the ground and then lifted him up again. George pretended to be glued to an invisible wall. “...and the ‘I told you not to put your hands on my woman again, you little sod’...and then you kicked...” Fred mimed kicking George in the stomach.

When they’d finished, they looked to him with big roguish grins on their faces but he didn’t so much as twitch with laughter. It was a shame, because if it had been someone else hurting Malfoy, he might have found their little show quite amusing.

“No?” George sighed. “Ah well. Save it for parties, eh?”

“Cheer up, mate,” Fred told him sympathetically. “Angelina isn’t stupid enough to like that little fungus back.”

"No way!" George groaned in disgust. "Not our Angelface. She's got bloody hearts swirling 'round in her eyes when she looks at you, ya wanker. So stop moping about."

"You want me to talk to her?" Fred offered seriously.

"No..." Harry shook his head, still staring at his trainers. "I still can't believe I wasn't caught." He spoke up again when they were on their way up to bed. "I just don't understand why Snape or someone hadn't come along..."

"Oh that's an easy one to explain," said George. "You see mate, you've joined forces with Fred and George Weasley. We're the rebels of the whole rebel scene!"

"Oh yes, you've been blessed with our good luck. We made a pact remember? That duel thing—that was the three of us putting our heads together."

"You're one of us now." George grinned

"No one can touch you," agreed Fred.

Harry didn't feel like a rebel. He felt really stupid. Perhaps hurting Draco Malfoy had been the right thing for him to do, if only to defend Angelina's honor and his own pride. But in the end it didn't matter, did it? Draco had, essentially, gotten what he wanted. Harry had not spoken much to Angelina since that night. Every time he saw her—despite her being so very beautiful to him, despite the fact that he knew he loved her and wanted her badly—he felt his anger rising terribly and he knew that if he allowed her to try and explain herself she would only infuriate him. They hadn't had another D.A. meeting because of Umbridge's detentions, but they were due for one soon. Harry didn't know how he would face it, and he had other problems concerning the D.A. as well. After the last meeting they'd had, in which Marietta had shown up nearly twenty minutes late, Harry, Ron, and Hermione had decided that it was time to vote her out. Harry only asked that he be allowed to tell Cho, out of respect, so that she could perhaps warn her friend. Maybe then things wouldn't be so dramatic and there wouldn't be too many hard feelings—for it seemed to Harry

that Marietta really didn't want to be there anyway. He explained as much to Cho.

"It isn't right," the pretty girl said, shaking her head at him. He had spotted her on the way to one of his detentions, "the three of you are just going to kick her out? Just like that?"

"Cho," Harry started patiently, "you've seen how she's been acting. You said yourself; she's all mixed up about her Mum and everything."

"Aye, but--!"

"And it just seemed to me," he cut her off authoritatively, "that she'd rather spend all her time snogging with her new boyfriend. Or maybe she's just showing up late all the time to get Smith's attention or whatever but the point is that she doesn't belong in the D.A. What we're trying to do is serious, and she's putting us all in danger of being caught."

"And what about me? Do you want to kick me out as well?" Harry hated the look of contempt in her large brown eyes.

"No...not at all..." Harry sighed and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Cho, we—I like you. Please understand I don't blame you. But your friend hates my guts and she's holding up everyone's progress—including yours—with her complaining."

Cho's shimmering eyes softened and she nodded, her raven hair fluttering softly. "I know...I just wish it didn't have to be this way."

"It'll be fine. She'll probably be glad to have the extra time for her new boyfriend. Who is it by the way? You said 'M'...Michael Corner? Max Huntington?"

"No..." Cho shook her head and stepped away from him. "I'd better go and break the news to her, then, shall I?"

"Yeah...sure..." She turned to walk off, but Harry called her back.
"Cho?"

"Yes, Harry?"

He really wondered...what would it have been like...? "So since you're speaking to me, I guess that means you're not still mad at me about the interview?"

Cho hesitated but shook her head. "No...I-I think I understand why you did it and, maybe a little, why you couldn't be with me. I guess..."

"I'm really sorry I yelled at you Cho," Harry told her genuinely.

"It's okay, Harry."

She left him then and he watched her go, feeling a little better briefly. Then he'd had to go and face Umbridge.

Now, as he left the courtyard and headed for the dungeons, he went over everything that had happened to him in the past few weeks. It seemed that it had all gone downhill since the aftermath of the Quibbler interview wore off. Even though Luna's dad had reprinted the issue and it went out again because the demand for it was so high; even though the tide of opinion had turned at the school to Harry's favor; none of it seemed to matter now that Malfoy had finally come between him and Angelina.

Harry couldn't fathom under what comfort Draco was operating—what he had up his sleeve that would deter him from going straight to Snape or Umbridge and flapping his gums about what happened. Hermione had been on pins and needles ever since, and any little thing Harry did she fancied would bring down the hammer of authority...but Harry had long since adopted a sense of calm over the whole thing. He only told himself that whatever Malfoy thought he would do in revenge, he'd be ready for him.

In the dungeons now, Harry spotted Draco merely standing with his friends, a look on his face that was virtually unreadable. They spared each other one, caustic glance before turning their gazes away without uttering a single word.

Snape descended upon the gathering of Slytherins and Gryffindors darkly in a flutter of black robes and opened the door to his classroom. He watched them file in one by one through the door, stopping Harry with an outstretched hand. "Remedial Potions tonight, Potter."

"Wha—but I thought it wasn't till Wednesday?"

"Oh begging your permission Mister Potter," Snape uttered with silky sarcasm. "But I do have other more pressing matters to attend to than re-teaching you what you should be learning during my class. The lesson has been rescheduled for tonight, do not be late."

Snape walked in ahead of Harry.

When he settled down in his seat between Ron and Hermione, she leaned over and whispered, "What was that about?"

"He's rescheduled our lesson for tonight instead of Wednesday," Harry muttered darkly, opening his Potions book.

"Silence." Snape warned from above them near the chalkboard. Hermione reluctantly went back to her book, but Harry caught the worried expression on her face before Snape ordered them to turn to the chapter concerning Sleeping Draughts.

"On your feet, Potter."

Harry stood up shakily, his eyes traveling the length of the Potions Master's robes until they met his face. Snape had just seen, one after the other, images from Harry's childhood again. Images of him getting beaten with Uncle Vernon's thick leather belt; pelted with rocks by Dudley and his stupid friends; slapped across the face by Petunia for talking back...

Harry had tried, but failed, to evoke the peace and stillness that his dueling exercises taught him.

"What were you doing just now?" Snape asked, almost on cue.

"What do you mean, sir?" Harry knew what he meant but was too nettled to give the information over so easily. Besides that, he wasn't supposed to know about dueling—else he might as well be admitting that he'd been one of the culprits on the pitch the night Umbridge got her unfortunate nickname. He couldn't understand why that memory hadn't surfaced yet and was scared of it turning up unexpectedly.

"There was a moment—I could hardly believe it, mind you, you've been doing so poorly—when I received nothing at all. A moment that, if it had lasted longer than a mere second, would have given you the advantage."

Harry frowned. He must've been doing something right then, if Snape had been unable to read him, if only for a moment. He shrugged in answer to the professor's inquiry. "I was just trying to do what you told me."

Snape regarded him enigmatically for a minute before raising his wand. "Again."

Harry said the words in his head along with Snape, knowing it was coming, one—two—three—Legilimens.

...Harry was running through the dark tunnels of the Chamber of Secrets, the Basilisk on his heels...he was flying on Buckbeak with his hands in the air, feeling so free and above it all...Sirius was smiling that lopsided grin of his as he told Harry the story of his mother and father falling in love on Christmas Eve...

Concentrate, Harry...somewhere deep inside him, a voice echoed. It sounded remarkably like Dumbledore's voice, though Harry knew it was only his subconscious. Be still...breathe...be quiet...

Harry concentrated on his breathing. Snape was now pulling the memory of Angelina putting his spectacles on in the shower...her soft laughter as the water ran down her hair...her body...breathe. Harry felt, again, a tremble inside himself. He felt the world around him stop and the silence crept up on him slowly. He breathed. He stood perfectly still...it was working! And just in time, too, because the last thing Harry saw zooming forth from his mind's eye was Rookwood

cowering at his feet. Only those weren't really Harry's color-less, unnaturally slender fingers that touched Rookwood's head in blessing, no...those were Voldemort's.

But just as quickly as it had come, Harry's memory stopped in its tracks, then reversed itself and seconds later faded away completely.

Harry felt that tremble again, and now instead of seeing his own memories flash before his eyes, he was seeing something else. A tall, dark-haired, hook-nosed man was towering over a small boy with the same features. The boy cowered in the corner of a dark bedroom, listening to the man call him stupid and useless and weak...then the image changed and Harry saw the same boy, a little older (about his age), running out of a classroom here at Hogwarts with Stinksap all over his face and in his slick black hair. The students in the classroom were all laughing rowdily—even the teacher was chortling to himself. The image changed again and the young man—Harry knew it was Snape in his early teens—was fuming in the same corner of the same bedroom from before, this time staring daggers at his closed door whilst the sounds of shouting voices echoed through it from outside. He twisted his wand in his hands like he was wringing someone's (probably his father's) neck and kicked at the wall when a woman's voice screamed and glass shattered.

Harry couldn't believe he was seeing all this, but the image of young Snape weeping angrily for whatever was happening to his mother was snatched away and the walls of the dungeon office came rushing back.

Harry stood firm on his feet, his wand still held at his side. This was a rather different way of ending Snape's attack—for the tables had turned. The Potions Master watched him silently for a long time, and Harry almost felt guilty for being so proud of himself. Surely he would pay for seeing those memories of Snape's childhood. He waited, holding his breath, until the dark wizard spoke to him.

"That was an improvement, Potter."

"Thanks...I think."

"I wasn't finished." Harry closed his mouth and steeled himself for whatever scornful thing would come from Snape's sneering lips. But instead of insulting the boy, Snape tilted his head and squinted at him. "A question: what was that last memory I saw before you overtook me?"

Harry hesitated. He was amazed that Snape wasn't furious that he'd seen such painful, personal things...he had fully expected to be attacked by another vicious mind-ravaging, but no...Snape was asking about...

"You mean...the one of Angelina? I-I know girls aren't supposed to be in the boys'--"

Snape held a hand up impatiently to silence him, his brow creasing with distaste. "No, Potter that is not the one I am referring to. Though incidentally, you are right—girls are not allowed in the boys' showers. Thirty points from Gryffindor." Harry mentally kicked himself for opening his big mouth. "No..." Snape continued, "...I was talking about the very last one. The one with the man kneeling in the dark room."

Harry felt his chest tighten and he swallowed thickly. The corner of Snape's mouth lifted in a skeptical way. His dark eyes flickered up and down at the messy-haired teen.

"How do that man and that room come to be in your mind?"

Harry blinked mechanically at Snape and shook his head. "It was just a dream I had once..." he lied.

"You're lying," the menacing wizard snapped. "You have been neglecting your Occlumency; your mind is as ripe and weak as a tomato, boy. That man, and that room do not belong there--"

"Is that a real place, then?" Harry asked abruptly. Snape clenched his jaw and the young wizard started again. "I mean, is that a real place, sir?"

"That is none of your concern."

Harry felt the fleeting excitement he had from maybe finally getting some information vanish and his temper flared up. “Why is it ‘none of my concern’, sir? Why won’t anyone tell me why I’m not meant to be seeing these things when they haven’t done anything but help all of you! You wouldn’t know a bloody thing if I hadn’t--!”

“Silence Potter!” Snape looked very dangerous just then and Harry, still fuming, clamped his mouth shut again. “Your arrogance is beyond belief—your ‘help’ is worth about as much as your useless godfather’s!”

“Don’t talk about Sirius like that...” he uttered very quietly, glaring at the Potions Master.

“Excuse me?” Snape’s eyes narrowed to tiny slits. Harry knew he was saying too much, but he couldn’t help himself. “Let me tell you something...” the pallid complexion of the slick-haired professor grew warm with the anger Harry could see he was struggling to restrain as he leaned over the desk, placing both hands flat upon it. When he spoke next his voice was barely above a whisper, and it was dripping with contempt. “There are those who do their so-called ‘fighting’ behind closed doors, sitting on their palms...complaining about everything and appreciating nothing, least of all the sacrifices their fellow Order members have made to keep them safe.”

Harry’s nostrils flared—he knew Snape was talking about Sirius.

“And then there are those of us (listen carefully, Potter, because this is how you can determine your own place in all of this) that risk our lives every—single—day in order to protect the Light, in order to keep the forces of the Dark Lord’s power at bay long enough to find some sure footing before the coming war.”

Harry breathed in and out slowly, his eyes fixed on Snape’s as the two of them regarded each other. “But you’re not keeping his power at bay. He knows how to get the weapon, now. That man in that room? Rookwood? He told Voldemort everything he wants to know.”

"I told you..." Snape almost growled. "...not to say the Dark Lord's name..."

He straightened up from the desk and drew his wand again. Harry watched him touch it to his temple and withdraw a thin stream of wispy thought before turning and depositing the substance into the stone basin on the shelf behind him. When he had finished, he turned back to Harry, his angry expression now melted into calm indifference.

"You are not entitled to information concerning the goings on in the Order, Potter. That isn't your place—you are but a charge in my care; a pupil under my tutelage." Harry opened his mouth to retort but Snape cut him off. "Be satisfied in my telling you that we already know about Rookwood, and we are dealing with the situation accordingly...your only task, Potter, is to master Occlumency. Nothing more. I know you fancy yourself quite the sleuth, but do not be fooled into thinking that you serve some great purpose or that your information saves us any danger. The headmaster wishes--"

"He wants me to keep my head down and my mouth shut, right?" Harry almost shouted, his anger rising violently.

He expected to be reprimanded, even sent out, but Snape merely surveyed him with cool disdain. "No, that is what I would like for you to do..."

Harry became incensed. All of the events of the past months, since the summer when he had been shut out of the loop by his own friends at Dumbledore's bloody wishes, came to a head. The anger he felt at Dumbledore and the hatred he had for Snape attacked him ferociously and the words came tumbling from his mouth without any regard for the consequences.

"Well I'm not going to shut up! To hell with Occlumency, and to hell with you! You and Dumbledore expect me to master the stupid thing, but all you do is try and rake me over the bloody coals all the time, and I'm sick of it! Why didn't Dumbledore teach me himself? Why'd he send you when he knows you hate me! How am I supposed to--!"

"Stop being such a child, Potter! You are not the center of Dumbledore's universe! Do you not ever stop to think—can you not even fathom that he might have a greater good to protect, a purpose and a mission behind his actions that expands beyond your juvenile concept of personal loyalty?"

"You bloody two-faced--!" Harry snarled, beside himself. He couldn't understand it, he just couldn't. Snape was cruel; he hated everything about Harry. Why—why would Dumbledore appoint him of all people to teach Harry something he thought was so important?

"What was that you called me, Potter?" Snape goaded him nastily.

It seemed that both Potions Master and pupil had been waiting for this to happen the entire time these lessons had been going on. It was as though their two personalities were clashing for the final time and now they had to explode all over each other. Whatever resentment Snape had been building up towards Harry for four and a half years; whatever dark goings on he'd endured since he'd had to return to Voldemort's side as a Death Eater...it was now rising to the surface very quickly. And to meet it—Harry's fury over everything that was happening to him: being accused over and over again of being a liar by Fudge, tortured by Umbridge, Draco Malfoy screwing around with Angelina, Angelina lying to him and on and on...

"I called you a two-faced liar!" Harry snarled. "You're not on our side—you're a Death Eater, only Death Eaters call him 'the Dark Lord'!"

"That is right, boy, only Death Eaters call him the Dark Lord." Snape leered at him and for one amazing yet woeful second, Harry thought he'd just admitted to being a traitor to the Order and an enemy of the Light. "And now do you have some idea why Dumbledore trusts me? Now, can you picture why I am perhaps more of a reliable and worthy servant to the Light than your pitiful godfather?"

"Sirius has more honor in him than you'll ever--!"

"Don't you square your shoulders at me, boy!" Snape bellowed when Harry took an angry step towards the desk. "You want to fight me, do you Potter? Do you?"

"No." Harry muttered through clenched teeth.

"Tell the truth! Look at you; you're positively shaking with your contempt for me! You are a poor Occlumens precisely because you do not have the subtly or the presence of mind to master your trivial emotions! You use your fists, when you should use your magic! You fight first and ask question later! You are weak, Potter!"

"I AM NOT WEAK!"

"Then prove it! Raise your wand!"

"Fine!" Harry stepped back and raised his wand. So did Snape. "Tear a hole through my brain if that's what you want! Have a look at every terrible thing I've ever gone through, laugh at my mum and dad dying for me, mock Sirius till the bloody cows come home!"

"I do not need to resort to petty mockery, Potter." Snape snarled. "I am not like your father was..." Harry thought he would dive across the desk and tackle the man, but before he could even blink Snape had raised his wand and shouted at the top of his lungs, "LEGILIMENS!"

Harry felt his brain swell as it was viciously attacked by the spell. The edges of his vision blurred horribly and then images were zooming forth with unbelievable force. Snape's enraged face loomed ahead of him, his mouth moving as he probed Harry's mind. Harry had not been ready, he was watching memory after memory follow Snape's call, and then he saw the green terror flash of his mother's death...saw Voldemort lurking before him in the cemetery...his mother screamed somewhere far away...Voldemort laughed...Snape called him weak...Draco Malfoy was kissing Angelina...

Harry let out a moan of fury and something alien clicked inside him.

The white noise came.

He felt his entire body was on fire.

Hummm, hummm....he lost all comprehension of his surroundings or what was happening to him.

Be still. Breathe. Breathing is important. It relaxes your senses and through its rhythm it allows you to open your mind slowly. Feel your magic pulsing through you. It will be difficult at first, but remember to stay very still and breathe well. The quiet will close in on you, and you will feel yourself falling into your own magical space, that rests deep within you. You will know it because all feeling, sense, and desire will drop. Stillness becomes true and quiet need not be sought...

Later, when Harry would force himself to think of something to compare it to, he would decide that it was almost like when he'd been put under the Imperius. He existed on a plane quite above caring what was happening to him. But instead of a little voice cheerily telling him to do things, there was only the fiery rage that led him to this situation in the first place. He boiled inside. His eyes were unseeing, his ears filled with that damned white noise...Harry was consumed with it; it was all around him, coursing through him like a toxic poison.

"Potter...Potter? POTTER!"

Harry's vision came back. He was no longer being bombarded with memories zooming away towards the call of Snape's spell. In fact, he could no longer see Snape at all, because the Potions Master was being obstructed from Harry's view by the desk that normally sat between them.

Harry very slowly realized that the desk was floating above the stone floor of the office—floating there between them in mid-air, blocking Snape from his view. The very second he did, however, it dropped back down to its resting place with a loud BANG! Along with it, about twenty or so glass jars that had also been floating in mid-air fell, and they shattered loudly at Snape and Harry's feet.

Just like in Umbridge's office, Harry felt his hair settling back onto his head as though he'd just touched down on his broom.

Snape stared at Harry, his mouth open slightly and his face more pale than the boy had ever seen it under the curtains of greasy black hair that framed it. Dark, wriggly things moved about in the slimy contents that had oozed from the broken jars onto the floor. The two of them stood silent. Harry did not know what he'd done, but he suspected that it had been something unnatural or at least extraordinary in some way—for Snape's eyes were alight with wonder.

Before either of them could break the silence, a faint scream sounded somewhere outside the office. Snape started, his eyes leaving Harry's to land on the door. Harry turned slightly in that direction, too, listening...the scream came again and this time was followed by a moaning "Nooo! You can't!"

Without saying a word, Snape raised his wand again and swept around the desk towards the door. He opened it and stepped through quickly, Harry on his heels, heading for the entrance hall where Sybil Trelawney was being sacked in front of the entire Hogwarts student body.

Chapter Thirty-One: Memory Lane Part Three: Dumbledore's Confidence

The sight of Albus Dumbledore; standing strikingly tall and inspiring against the misty night behind him through the doors of the castle; moved Angelina, and therefore she knew she was saved.

Though she understood he was there for Professor Trelawney, who'd been put on the chopping block and then set up to roast under the blazing fire of Umbridge's triumphant gaze, she still felt her heart swell with happiness and relief. Dumbledore would make things right! He would help her get rid of Malfoy and then she could get Harry back. The arrival of the Centaur Firenze shocked and awed many—but not Angelina. She focused wholly on the headmaster, who with every small gesture, kind smile, and soft yet commanding utterance made the feeling of hope swell in her. The whole damned school seemed to have turned up for Trelawney's very humiliating dismissal, yet even though she was one of a huge crowd of students, Angelina's heart fluttered when the old wizard's eyes caught hers for a mere second—and she fancied she saw him give her the tiniest of winks. But then Firenze walked a path through the crowd, passing right by her, and when she looked again Dumbledore was ascending the marble staircase behind McGonagall, Sprout, and Flitwick, who were all escorting a sniveling Trelawney back to her tower.

Angelina hadn't meant for things to happen like this. Sometimes, you put off doing your homework assignment because you just can't muster the effort; sometimes you avoid talking to people that you really aren't fond of; sometimes you tell yourself little white lies to justify something you've done...

Angelina told herself over and over again that she would tell Harry about the kiss for days and days. You'll tell him today, Angelina...now is a good time, Angie...you should mention it now, it won't be so bad...tomorrow—I'll do it tomorrow...

Oh could she say that she only meant well by delaying the moment when she would have to tell him the rest of the story? Of course she did; because Harry seemed happy. They had both done something; taken a step in a new direction. They weren't just school kids flirting

anymore—their relationship was real. She had gotten him to trust her; gotten him to open himself up to accept her love for him. Angelina really had come to love him. Was that so hard for everyone to believe?

And could she say that in her own mind him not knowing what had happened seemed, when she was justifying her stalling to herself in her head, like it was all for the best? She thought...if she could just hold on until Dumbledore came back...if she could just get Malfoy out...then he would be gone and she and Harry could finally be together in peace.

Angelina had spent a lot of time reading the things that Draco wrote in her playbook when Harry returned it to her. Curiosity, she supposed, played a large part in that. But there was also something else. Though she would not admit this to herself—it was very deeply buried in all of her reasoning for having the tiniest shred of sympathy for the boy—she was secretly fascinated by his bizarre infatuation with her.

"I just know what I want and I can't take it anymore..." What did that mean—and why? Why did he want her so badly that he would set himself up for so much trouble? Angelina could only guess that perhaps it was a cry for help. Perhaps he saw her as his only way to make people see him—maybe causing trouble seemed like the only option he had left before he was completely sucked into his father's life. Angelina imagined, with some amount of sympathy, that it must be very terrifying to face the fact that soon...soon you could end up face to face with You-Know-Who as his servant. And if you messed up...

She knew she was doing the right thing by going to Dumbledore because the headmaster understood things that other teachers didn't. Mercy, for one thing, was something Angelina doubted McGonagall would show the boy if ever she found out that Draco had tried to force himself on one of her students. Mercy...and a sense of safety that truly no other teacher possessed quite the way Dumbledore did. McGonagall was indeed loyal and trustworthy and powerful and all of that—but somehow Angelina knew that Dumbledore was the one person who could help her with her unique problem.

And after what happened in the dungeons...Angelina knew she must act fast, or something worse could happen. Though she couldn't think what. She had never seen Harry so angry. Apart from being absolutely terrified of him, she felt so very panicked that he had turned from her. He wouldn't even look at her when it was over and had scarcely said two words to her since.

She, Ginny, and Hermione had discussed it one evening, all three girls expressing their concerns for him.

"It was scary..." Hermione whispered, staring into the fire. She shook her head slowly, her eyes narrowing as she thought back to the incident. "I've never seen Harry act like that. He was so out of control!" She shuddered.

Angelina felt the sting of tears in her eyes and nostrils. She squeezed her eyes shut and let the surge of emotion wash over her before lowering her head to her hands. "He could've really killed Malfoy..." she muttered. "And it would've been all my fault..."

"Angelina, you shouldn't blame yourself," came Ginny's gentle voice from her position sitting next to Angelina on the couch. "You were only trying to protect Harry; there's nothing wrong with that."

"Yes, but..." Angelina lifted her head again, her face damp with tears. "...I should've told him. I just should have gone straight to him and told him the truth." She felt herself becoming upset again and her lip quivered. Hermione and Ginny looked on, empathetic expressions darkening their features as the firelight danced across their skin. "After all he's been through...and how long it took him to trust me...really let me in...I ruined it! I hurt him, how could I be so stupid!"

She gave in to her sorrow and leaned over to weep on Ginny's shoulder. The younger girl who, to be perfectly honest, Angelina sometimes caught herself feeling jealous of comforted her as she cried. Hermione was sitting on the hearthrug, and she watched Angelina for a moment before she almost whispered, "You really do love Harry, don't you?"

Angelina turned to look at her, her glistening eyes widening with surprise. "I told you I did."

"I'm sorry, it's just that..." Hermione shrugged slowly. "I did wonder...but now I can see that you really do. I meant no offense. Harry's my best friend. I worry for him, that's all."

"We all do..." Ginny added quietly, her arm still around Angelina's shoulders. "I hadn't really been seeing what you guys were talking about before...but that thing in the dungeons...that was so horrible..."

Angelina nodded, sitting up straight, but allowing Ginny to keep her in a loose embrace. She gazed into the fire for a moment, thinking back, and then despite herself she snorted. "Good punch, though, Ginny."

Slowly, the other girls smiled and agreed that it was a good punch.

Just then the portrait hole creaked open and Ron emerged, followed by Fred and George, with Harry taking up the rear.

Angelina's breath caught in her chest mid-chuckle, and she quickly wiped her face.

Ron and the twins were laughing about something. Angelina's heart began to pound against her chest painfully when she looked on Harry following the other boys. He had his head down and a thoughtful smile was on his face, but he appeared to only be half-listening to the twins as they rambled on about their latest invention.

"What's that called again?" he asked before he noticed that the girls were sitting there. Fred was answering 'Lucky Knuts', but Harry had paused, his green eyes traveling across each face until they landed on Angelina's. She stared, wide-eyed and a little afraid, as he looked at her for a lingering moment. His face was full of some emotion that seemed very potent and Angelina prayed that it wasn't anger. She tried to convey her guilt and regret and love for him all at once in her own face, but he merely dropped his eyes and continued walking past the three boys who'd stopped to say hello to the girls. "I'm going up to bed," he muttered.

Ron stared after him, looking very solemn. "You don't wanna play chess or anything?" he asked his friend. Harry shook his head, his back to them all, and began his ascent to the boys' dorms. They all watched him go, a silence befalling them, until he had disappeared from their view. Angelina stood up abruptly, determined to follow him and make him talk to her, but Ron stopped her. "Let him be for a bit, okay?" he said to her, gently pulling her back to face him.

She turned her gaze on Ron and jerked her hand away, wanting very much to be furious with him. "I need to talk to him."

"He doesn't wanna talk right now, Angelina," Ron's blue eyes narrowed as he returned her resentment. "You should respect that."

"Oh it's easy for you to say, you snitch!" she hissed. "Did you get back into his good graces again by telling him what a two-faced slut I am?"

"Wha--? No! Get a grip on yerself!" He shook his head in disgust. "I'm not your enemy here!"

The others looked on warily, and Fred and George began shooing lounging Gryffindors hastily from the room.

"Go back to your knitting, you nosey sods. Get out of it, go on..." George ushered a couple of first years up the stairs while Fred pushed some third years through the portrait hole. The four of them groaning that it was past curfew and they'd be roasted by Filch for being out in the halls, but the portrait was shut in there pitiful little faces and Fred turned around again to listen in on the row.

Angelina felt her frustration bubbling forth, and she jabbed a shaking finger at him, her chest heaving jerkily with restrained emotion. "If you hadn't cornered me in the common room—if you had just let me tell him myself--!"

"That's bollocks and you know it! You weren't gonna tell'im a bloody thing, Angelina!" Ron snarled. "Don't you try and blame me for what you did. He's your bloody boyfriend—he had a right to know!"

"Ron!" Hermione rushed forth and took hold of his arm. He rounded on her, his face red with anger, and she shushed him soothingly, running her hands along his arms to calm him down. "Please...stop yelling. Can't you see she's really upset?"

Angelina stood stiffly, watching the two of them...Ron leaned forward and closed his eyes as he rested his forehead on Hermione's. She whispered to him...Angelina let out a growl of frustration and seconds later Fred was holding her, telling her it would be all right.

When everyone had calmed down, Angelina stopped her crying and silently told herself that there would be no more.

Once she and Ron had finished exchanging apologies, she adopted the attitude that had gotten her through those first terrible Quidditch practices--gotten her through Harry and the twins being banned from the team--gotten her through every hard situation in her young life...

Angelina sat on the couch between Ginny and Fred and listened to them all talking about Harry. She said very little. She was thinking...putting her plan together in her head. She would see the headmaster when he returned. Until then, she could handle Harry's angry silence. She could handle it. As for Malfoy...Angelina could handle him, too. She would not allow him to so much as talk to her again. He could not, and would not back her into a corner for a third time. It was time now to act her age—time to make her choices. She loved Harry Potter. There was really nothing else to know...just that. It could sustain her until things were right again.

"I have heard of people having small bursts of wandless emotional magic," Hermione was saying. "I've even done things, when I was very little, that let me know I was different...but I've never seen anything like what Harry did in the dungeons."

"Me neither," Ron agreed. "Dad says wizards go to school precisely because that kind of magic has to be filtered, and we learn how to do it here."

"It's a bit like the dormant part of the brain, isn't it?" Hermione continued. At their inquiring looks, she went on patiently: "I read in a

Muggle magazine once that humans only use about thirty percent of our brains--"

"Blimey, is that all?" Fred's mouth dropped open.

"Well, I imagine wizards use a little over forty percent, very powerful ones near fifty...sometimes sixty." Hermione corrected.

"I'll bet that's Dumbledore," said Ron.

"Or You-Know-Who..." added Ginny.

They were all silent for a minute, each probably thinking dark thoughts concerning Voldemort. Hermione adjusted herself in Ron's lap and went on. "Anyway, the article said that for a human to use more than forty percent of his brain would be highly abnormal, and that to use all of it would probably cause severe problems, like constant seizures and stuff like that."

"Okay..." said George. "That sounds like Muggle science rubbish to me. What's this got to do with Harry?"

Hermione sat thoughtfully for a second or two before answering him. "I was just thinking that maybe we wizards measure our magical activity—our power—the same way. I'll bet that most wizards only use a certain amount of magical power. Putting us all at about the same level, respectively. Sure, we all differ in the way we learn and how well we put our magic to use, but...well only a few of us get to be really powerful. I mean, think about it—how many wizards can you name that are as powerful as Dumbledore?"

They all sat thinking, but no one answered her. Then Ron shook his head. "Hang on, Hermione, I'm not so sure we're all at the same level. I mean, you're loads better at just about everything than anybody here."

"Ahem..." Fred cleared his throat pointedly.

"Okay, so maybe they've got one on you in the 'talent for inventing things that make trouble' department, then..." Ron added, gesturing half-heartedly at the twins.

"Well, I don't mean to say we all operate on the same level, Ron. But I do truly believe that you have just as much power in you as I have—you just use yours differently, that's all. Or you haven't completely tapped into it yet. It's the same for all wizards, I think. Just like with the brain—we all have the same capacity, but rather few of us have the ability to utilize as much as wizards like Dumbledore."

"But you think Harry has?" Angelina spoke finally, staring at Hermione.

"Yes..." the bushy-haired girl gazed back. "Harry is special." Angelina listened to Hermione's theory, as they all did. She asserted that she believed Harry had tapped into a source of power he held in himself that remained dormant until recently. She did not rightly know when or how this power awoke in him, but it was unstable—the proof was in his many outbursts and his nearly strangling Malfoy to death. "If you think about magical power in the same context as human brain activity, then you can deduce that Harry was probably using a much higher percentage than us."

"I did think it was pretty wicked that he can already do wandless magic for only a fifth year..." Fred muttered to himself.

"It wasn't just that," Ginny told him. "What he did to Malfoy was so unlike him, wasn't it? Never mind that he was angry over what that jerk's been doing to Angelina...Harry was totally out of it. He wouldn't respond to us at all."

"Yeah," said Ron. "Hermione even tried to Stun him, but..." his eyes went wide; he was remembering. They were all remembering as though out of nowhere—"That's right! Hermione, you tried to Stun him! And it didn't work!" Ron exclaimed in awe.

"Hang on, are you joking?" asked George, sitting forward in the armchair he'd settled himself in.

Hermione shook her head slowly. “The jinx bounced right off him. I’m not sure if he had a shield around himself or not...but I don’t suppose it matters—the fact is that he did it without his wand, and it took Ginny punching him in the face to get him to stop.”

“Well done, Ginny...” said Fred, though a little less enthusiastically than he normally would have. He still held onto Angelina, who wanted to ask a question, but was holding back. For she knew the answer already...but...she wanted to hear them say it.

“Do you think...do you think it’s his anger that fuels this ‘power’?”

Hermione gazed at her and nodded. “Yes. And I think it’ll get worse—the more he ignores his Occlumency, the more agitated he becomes...Angelina I don’t think he’s aware of it, and that means he won’t be able to control it.”

“So we should try not to upset him anymore...” Ginny offered.

Angelina felt herself blinking back tears, but she did not let them come. “Right. I should leave him alone, then.”

“Why do you say that about his Occlumency, Hermione?” Ron changed the subject quickly.

“I-I don’t know how they’re connected--I just feel that they are...”

Angelina so admired how Hermione handled the fact that just about everyone in their group looked to her for guidance, information, and sometimes hope.

And so the days passed.

Angelina prepared herself for Dumbledore’s arrival. She studied her Quidditch plays over and over in anticipation of the next match. They had practice only twice, but every single member of the team worked double-hard. Angelina couldn’t decide if it were simply that none of them wanted to lose the Cup to Slytherin, or if it were the unspoken intensity that both Angelina and especially Ron were bringing onto the pitch now, but they were all improving.

When she wasn't perfecting her plays, she was studying for her upcoming N.E.W.T. exams. It was an advantage for her that everyone was so consumed with school work. Exams loomed ahead, and as the days progressed more and more work was heaped upon the fifth and seventh years. Harry had taken to outright avoiding her—she would only see him for longer than a few seconds during meals when he had no choice but to be in the same room with her. But then...he would not look at her and when she looked at him all she saw on his face was emptiness. But she knew there was something there. He was making a marvelous effort not to ever show her how he was feeling during those days, but she knew in her heart that she had broken his—even though all she had done was allow his enemy to corner her again. And kiss you, don't forget—and then you didn't even tell him about it... she harshly reminded herself often.

She tried to be strong.

The D.A. meetings seemed to have stopped, and though Hermione and the others chalked it up to everyone being swamped with homework, Angelina knew that it was because Harry didn't want to face her. She missed him—they crossed paths almost every day but they were so apart that it was driving her crazy. She had even dreamed about him, waking up and reaching to snuggle up in his arms but always finding that he wasn't there. It made her feel so awful, wanting to tiptoe to the boys' side of the Tower, but not being able to. How she wanted him...but he remained out of her reach. Still...she waited.

She saw Draco in the halls, passing her by. She saw him walking into the Great Hall during meals...saw him in the courtyard with his friends. She didn't understand why he kept quiet about what Harry had done to him, but always his eyes found hers and always he looked as if he were just as confused and upset as she was. She couldn't comprehend him. The boy had split right down the middle; somewhere between the time he found out she and Harry fancied each other and the night he Obliviated her...he had changed. She didn't know why and she didn't care. All she wanted was for him to go away.

The last twenty or some pages of her playbook had been bewitched so they appeared blank, but when she got it back the spell wore off.

She only showed Harry a fraction of the things she found there—he told her outright that he didn’t care to read it all. It always angered him. That was truly a testament to how patient he’d been with her and how much her wishes mattered to him—if reading some of that stuff hadn’t driven him to go and pummel Malfoy at once, then she could only assume it was because he was restraining himself for her sake. Some of the things written on those pages...it was very good that Draco bewitched the pages so that none of his fellow Slytherins could read them. They explained the intensity present in the Slytherin boy’s eyes when he asked her: “You read what I wrote? Then you know what I mean...”

He treated her notebook, or at least the few pages he could save from Montague’s shrewd interpretation of her plays for himself, as a makeshift diary. The entries were not dated and they were written at random in little paragraphs or simple sentences. Sometimes there were only a couple of words written there, but Angelina had come to understand what everything said. Perhaps she’d numbed herself to it, passing it off as some bully fifth year’s pubescent ramblings...but that isn’t what they were at all.

-So this is mine now. I have it, and there is nothing any of them can do—especially Potter.

-And I like her. Don’t understand why...is it because of Potter? Maybe...it’s bloody maddening!

-He is a cocky little arsehole, isn’t he, that Potter? Strutting round with her on his arm like he’s the fucking king of the school. I should knock his head off his shoulders and hand it to her on a velvet pillow...ha. That would be a sight, but would she thank me for it? No...no she’s just as full of herself as he is...

-Keep thinking about it. Thinking of you—thinking, thinking, always thinking of you Angelina, you blood-traitor, associating with those Muggle-loving oafs the Weasels and hanging round with that Mudblood...

-BOLLOCKS!

-Pansy. UGH PANSY. Close my eyes...Pansy is gone. You are there. I like you better...if you liked me that would be...

-She's far from Angelic, isn't she? She struggled, and she said "Go to hell!" Or at least she tried to, but my hand was covering that pretty mouth of hers...I keep thinking about that. Wonder what Potter would say to that? Ha ha! Wonder what that idiot would say if he knew I had his precious Angelina under me thrashing around...wonder...

-Where am I? Is this Hogwarts or is this some weird fucking parallel universe? What the hell is going on? Why did I do that? WHY, WHY, WHY? I want—I need—I can't have her, I can't have her and it's driving me insane. My father would strangle me if he knew I fancied her. There is nothing about her I should like...not her soft, warm dark skin...like chocolate...like deep rich chocolate...not her long, beautiful hair, her eyes...those burning eyes, Angelina I love your eyes...and your body. Powerful girl...she hit me like she hated me and she probably does but it drove me wild. I'll burn with her, with those eyes of hers...

-Angelina. Angelina. Angelina. That fucking bitch. That goddamned—what the HELL does she see in POTTER?

....and she said she was starting to remember things? Oh no. Oh no. She can't. What the bloody hell was the point of Obliviating her if—damn that Potter! I WANT TO KILL HIM. AND I WILL. I WILL—A DUEL? A DEUL, EH? AND MY FATHER TREATING ME LIKE SOME HALF-WIT CHILD! ARGHHH! I WILL KILL HARRY POTTER FOR GOOD AND ALL THESE FOOLS THAT WORSHIP HIM WILL KNOW HE'S NOTHING MORE THAN SHITE UNDER MY BOOT!...and then Angelina would know...that I can beat him. I'm faster, stronger...ha ha, better-looking...

-If she does remember...does that mean she thinks I'm--? Sick? What arsehole would do what I did? What did I do? I don't understand it. Neither does she, I'm betting. She mustn't remember. But if she does...? Why won't she turn me in—she could do it right now,

couldn't she? Maybe she doesn't think I'm sick, maybe she really likes me too and she's just waiting for that idiot Potter to get himself expelled—YOU BLOODY DUNDERHEAD, MALFOY, GET A GRIP, SHE DOESN'T LIKE YOU!

Those were just some of the things he had written down. Harry had not read most of them.

She stayed away. And she waited. School progressed, and rumors started spreading that Umbridge was going to fire someone, though no one knew who. Many thought; and Angelina knew Ron, Harry, and Hermione feared; that it would be Hagrid.

She saw Harry briefly before he had gone down to his Occlumency lesson the night of Sybil Trelawney's sacking.

It was near the end of dinner, and Angelina was coming down late with Katie and Alicia from the library. They'd been cramming for a test and were just going to grab some dessert before turning in, when she spotted his solitary figure walking out of the Great Hall. He had his head down; this was becoming a frequent posture for him—it was as though he and Ron had swapped places; his hands were in his pockets. Angelina stopped talking with Katie about their Muggle Studies and watched him. She had promised herself that she wouldn't bother him, but seeing him just then caused a swell of longing to grow within her...her friends turned to see what she was looking at and fell into expectant silence...

"Harry." He looked up and saw her stepping down from the marble staircase. He stopped walking. His face was blank, as usual these days, but his eyes shone vividly. He didn't say anything at all, and Angelina was afraid he was going to simply continue walking.

"How's it going, Harry?" Katie asked with forced casualness. Angelina groaned inwardly with embarrassment. "Studying all right?"

"Yeah...it's fine," was his terse reply. He was turning...she wanted so badly to say something, anything...his eyes flickered at her quickly and then Alicia was talking to him.

"Where're you off to, then?"

"Er...Remedial Potions. With Snape."

"Oh..."

His cheeks turned scarlet and he ran a hand through his hair. Angelina also noticed that his sleeves were rolled up. Good grief, he was so attractive just as himself. Just as he stood there, staring at her and her silly girlfriends, his hair all over his head, his bag slung carelessly over his shoulder, those shining green eyes... Merlin she missed him. Wanted him. Needed him to speak to her...yell at her...acknowledge her...

Angelina opened her mouth. He seemed to sense she was going to say something to him, and cut her off before she got a chance.

"I'd better go. Don't wanna be late."

"See you around, Harry," Alicia called as he turned away from them and continued towards the corridor leading to the dungeons. He didn't answer. Angelina watched him go, feeling very sad, and Alicia nudged her hard in her side. "You should have said something, Angelina."

"I don't think he wanted me to..."

"He'll come around." Katie offered, though Angelina caught the look she gave Alicia.

"Yeah. Sure." She walked on ahead of them into the Great Hall. Angelina took a very deep...very slow...breath.

She held the playbook in her trembling hands as she stood in front of the stone gargoyle guarding the entrance to Headmaster Dumbledore's office. She had been standing there for nearly ten minutes, trying to muster the courage to go in...

They were to have a D.A. meeting tonight. Angelina decided to skip dinner to come up here, and she knew the headmaster would be in his office because she had noticed he'd been missing the evening meals for several days. At first she was afraid that he'd gone away again, but upon asking McGonagall where he was, she was informed that he was still at Hogwarts, though he had things to attend to that sometimes took up more time than some would like. Angelina got the feeling McGonagall was referring to herself—perhaps she wanted to discuss her 'probation' from Umbridge with him and he had no time to? This didn't matter—Angelina had to see him now or she would lose her nerve.

The night before, Fred sat up with her because she couldn't sleep. He snuck down to the kitchens and got them some milk and biscuits from the house elves. They sat cross-legged on the hearth rug, eating the freshly-baked chocolate chip things and drinking ice cold milk. They didn't say much at first, but soon Angelina felt herself becoming very panicky and nervous. Fred, who knew her so well, could see it on her face.

"What're you so worried about, Angelface?" he asked her gently. "Dumbledore isn't going to bite you."

"It's not that, really..." she told him, putting down her glass of milk. "I'm not afraid of him."

"Then what is it?"

Angelina hesitated. She and Fred had lost some of their closeness since she started going out with Harry. This was to be expected, of course, but things had gotten so complicated that she doubted he would understand what she was feeling at that particular moment, even if he did know her better than anyone.

"I'm scared—I'm scared that this won't work. You know? I mean, not that Dumbledore won't be able to help me, but that even if he does, Harry won't..." she trailed off, finding it too painful to say aloud.

"Sweetheart, that kid is bonkers for you, you know that right?" Fred said to her seriously. She almost burst into tears then, but held it at bay, shaking her head hard instead.

"I did some dumb things, Fred..."

He snorted. "You think dueling on the bloody Quidditch pitch was smart?" She gave him a watery smile. "Come here, love."

She obeyed him, crawling over to his waiting arms. He held her close, squeezing her tight before allowing her to relax against him. She closed her eyes. They hadn't hugged like this in a long time. It reminded her of how they used to be; so close. She and George were very good friends too, but Fred had always shared a spark with Angelina he did not share with anyone else, and she didn't either, for that matter. He spoke to her, and she listened to his breathing as the low, deep rumble of his voice sounded in the ear she had pressed against his chest. He simply told her that no matter what Harry decided, she still needed to do the right thing about Malfoy. The thing was action, not hesitation or sympathy.

"He didn't ask you if you wanted your memory erased, did he? No—he bloody wiped it and then after Harry told him not to mess with you again, what did he do? Sodding wanker..."

"Things shouldn't have been this way," Angelina said, really feeling the absurdity of the whole damned thing. "Never, not at all. I should've stopped things clean. Simple."

"You will, Angie. You're doing the right thing, going to Dumbledore."

She was doing the right thing.

"Fizzing Whizbee..." she almost whispered, but the gargoyle seemed to have heard her loud and clear. It sprang to life and moved aside for her. Angelina watched it, her heartbeat steadily growing, spreading slowly up to her throat. She swallowed thickly and stepped onto the spiral stairs. They began to carry her up, up, up to Dumbledore's office.

The large door with the brass knocker shaped like the head of a griffin greeted her when she stepped off of the spiral stairs. She stared at it for a beat, took another breath, and reached up to take hold of it. She knocked with it once, sharply, and waited. Time seemed to stretch on painfully until the moment she heard the soft voice of Dumbledore call, "Come in, please."

Here goes...Angelina thought to herself as she pushed open the heavy door and stepped into the office. She had not been in this office since first year, and it looked exactly the same as she remembered it. Many silver gadgets sat on tables all around her, tinkling and whirring. Fawkes the phoenix was perched near her, looking vibrant and otherworldly. The portraits lining the walls of former Headmasters and various other school officials looked down on her unabashedly as she walked in, some merely blinking at her curiously, others outright staring.

"Ah, Miss Johnson." Dumbledore's kind, yet slightly surprised greeting startled her and she tore her eyes away from the portrait of a particularly severe-looking wizard; the plaque under his image named him Phineas Nigellus.

"Oh—hello sir."

Dumbledore smiled warmly at her. He was sitting at his desk, clad in beautifully woven robes of soft blue and gold, his hat the same color with little gold flecks of stitched starlight shimmering at her. His twinkling blue eyes observed her thoughtfully over his spectacles. She stood perfectly still. She did not feel eighteen at all in his presence, but rather younger and unsure. He seemed to understand that he had this effect on students. "Shouldn't you be enjoying your dinner?" he asked benignly.

"Um...yes, well I needed to see you, sir."

"Students are supposed to make appointments to see the Headmaster, young miss," said Phineas Nigellus sharply from his portrait above her. He sighed with exaggerated boredom. "Though Dumbledore, you seem to have let that rule slide this year, haven't you?"

Dumbledore ignored him, and he raised his eyebrows at Angelina before gesturing that she sit down. She did, clutching the playbook to her chest. "And what can I do for you this evening?"

"I—I need your help, sir..." she was distracted by the portrait's comment. Phineas was looking at her with thorny disdain—he did not seem to like girls much. She swallowed, determined to get through it. Dumbledore sat waiting. "It's about another student. Um...I think you know who he is...Draco Malfoy?"

Dumbledore leaned forward in his chair and regarded Angelina seriously, his kind smile melting to an expression of the utmost attentiveness. "Yes...what about Draco Malfoy, Miss Johnson?"

She felt the weight of his gaze on her and almost lost her resolve, but gathered herself. Fred was right—Dumbledore would not bite her.

"There is something...there is something you should know about him—something important, sir."

"All right."

"A few months ago, Draco tried to--sir, he tried to...force me to...um..." she was feeling flustered. The gadgets in the office ticked and whirred. Dumbledore leaned forward slightly more.

"He tried to force you to what, Angelina?" Something in his voice...something so perceptive, so deliberate...it was as though he already knew what she was going to say—that he was prepared to hear it, and all she needed to do was utter it to him—it made her forget her nerves and her panic. She sat up straight and continued.

"He attacked me, sir."

Phineas Nigellus made a small noise that sounded like a snort of surprise, and the others began to buzz amongst each other from the shock of her confession, but Dumbledore held up a hand for silence without taking his eyes from hers. There was a long pause in which

neither headmaster nor student said anything, then Dumbledore sighed slowly.

"Please...tell me everything...if you can."

Feeling a cool wave of relief wash over her, Angelina cleared her throat and loosened her clutching hands from the playbook. She set it on his desk. "He was after this that night, I think." Dumbledore picked up the book and studied it. "It's my playbook, sir. I'm Quidditch Captain," she explained unnecessarily, "and our teams were getting ready for a match--"

"There is more in this book than just plays?" his eyes remained on the book, though he hadn't opened it.

"Er—yes sir." Angelina wondered how he knew that without looking inside.

He lifted his eyes to her face and smiled faintly at her. "I can see a Concealment Charm has been cast on it."

"Oh. Well, yes, he bewitched it so the pages he wrote on looked blank, but the spell wore off shortly after I got it back."

"So he stole it from you, and you stole it back?" asked Phineas somewhat skeptically. She turned to look up at him. "Why did you not notify a teacher? Especially if he did...what you say he did...on the same night, girl?"

"Phineas..." Dumbledore's voice, though very soft, held a note of warning that caused Phineas Nigellus to abruptly abandon his disdainful gaze on Angelina and roll his eyes away to the far wall. Though he put on that he was annoyed with Dumbledore's reprimand, Angelina could tell that he would not dare interrupt again. When she turned back to Dumbledore he inclined his head, his eyes closing briefly, solemnly. "Please continue, Angelina."

Another deep breath and she plunged ahead. "I think I walked back alone from Quidditch practice that night. I mean, I know I did,

because I like to think about things on the walk up to the castle. Um, a-and he must've followed me..."

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow at her. "Do you mean to say that you do not remember what happened?"

More whispers from the portraits. Angelina could feel that awful Nigellus fellow's eyes on her. "Yes, sir. He Obliviated me."

"A student?" someone exclaimed. "That is unbelievable!"

"He did!" Angelina responded, turning in her seat to glare at them all. They were still talking amongst themselves, some of them staring down at her with either expressions of disbelief or shock. "Only..." she turned back to the headmaster. "...only he must not have done it properly because things have been coming back to me. Little things here and there...I've had dreams..."

Again, Dumbledore sighed slowly. "Yes...yes I know what you mean. Draco is too young and inexperienced to cast such a powerful spell on someone without backlash of some sort...naturally you would experience those side effects."

"You believe me, sir?" Angelina almost pleaded. She seemed to be operating on a completely different level than normal. She was used to giving orders, used to being strong and resolute—but tonight in Dumbledore's office she was little more than a child in need of help.

The old wizard's kind smile returned and he nodded, his slender fingers resting lightly on her playbook that lay on his desk.

"I never doubted you, Miss Johnson. I can see what you've been through in your eyes...I can hear it in your voice." His smile faded, and those blue eyes of his flickered at her intensely. "I suspect there is a great deal more to this story than you are telling me..."

Angelina felt the emotion she'd been holding at bay for days threaten to rise...she swallowed and nodded, her eyes burning to let forth the tears she was fighting off. "Yes sir...there is..."

"May I?" he held up the playbook. She nodded again. The headmaster opened the book and frowned as he flipped through a half-dozen of its pages. Then he skipped a big chunk, coming to the first page of Draco's little diary. He paused, the shade of blue in his eyes deepening considerably as they narrowed, and she knew he was reading what the troubled teen had written. The professors in their portraits shifted restlessly and craned hopelessly to catch a glimpse of the pages as he read, and after a long while he closed the book and set it back down on the desk. "There is indeed evidence in this book that supports her story, Phineas," he let his eyes travel to the Nigellus portrait for a brief second before standing up from his desk. He walked over to the wall near Angelina's chair and raised his head to regard the portrait of a pointy-nosed, black-haired woman wearing dark green robes. "Mona?"

"Yes, Dumbledore?" answered the woman with mock-annoyance, her eyes reluctantly leaving Angelina to look down upon the headmaster. "You'll send me away from such a thrilling interview on some tedious errand, will you?"

"Only for a moment, my dear Professor Stormcrow, only for a moment."

Dumbledore bowed his head respectfully, and Angelina could see a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth. She looked on, wondering what was about to happen. Was he sending her for Draco? Would she have to face him while she was trying to get him expelled? Well...if that was the case...she was ready.

Mona Stormcrow clicked her tongue, but returned his smile. "Well, where shall it be, then?"

"If you'll please, go and rouse your friend Ignatius—tell him to find Professor Snape."

"And what is your message for the Professor?"

"The Professor has borrowed something from me. I need it back for a while. He'll know what you mean."

“Very good.”

“Thank you...”

Angelina and Dumbledore watched Professor Stormcrow leave her portrait, her green robes fluttering slightly with her haste to finish the task and return before anything juicy happened.

“What’s going on, Professor Dumbledore?” asked the pensive seventh year from her seat. Dumbledore turned to her and brought his hands together in a gesture of contemplation. He rocked on his feet slightly, gazing at her enigmatically. She swallowed.

“Angelina...I wonder if I might ask you to bear with me for a moment?”

“Yes sir...”

He inclined his head again in thanks and brought his hands to rest behind his back, still rocking very slightly. “The news you’ve brought me tonight of your fellow student’s behavior is...rather disturbing, to say the least.”

“I’m sorry, sir--” she began, somehow feeling guilty for troubling him when he already had so much on his plate, but he hushed her, his brow creasing deeply.

“No, no, my dear...there is nothing whatsoever for you to feel sorry about!” And she watched him put a hand to his heart, his eyes full of lament. “It is I who should be apologizing. I have been...absent...these months. I cannot deny that in my stead Professor Umbridge has made for a rather...harsh...disciplinarian. And to think that you could not come to me, or that I was unaware of this most unfortunate situation whether because I was distracted by matters I thought were very important or because I was away trying to defend my right to remain an authority here—well...” he chuckled sadly, shaking his head at himself. “What could be more important than the physical and emotional well being of my students? And, for that matter, what good is arguing for my authority when I am not here to use it?”

Angelina was beginning to feel better, more confident now than ever that she had made the right choice in coming here to talk with him. She watched him lower his gaze to the floor, and he stared at it for a beat, seemingly lost in thought. When he looked up at her again, his expression was very serious, though his eyes glinted as they often did behind those spectacles.

"I would like, if I may, to hear your account of what happened—as much as you can remember at all. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes...I think so." He nodded that he was listening. Angelina thought back—she probed her herself for any of the images or fragments of the lost memory that she could...and she caught something in the dark corners of her mind. She sat up straighter in her chair—"He...he pushed me against a tree..." her eyes lost focus, she was thinking hard. "And I know I struggled—there was dirt in my hair, my robes were torn..."

The professors in their portraits were absolutely silent. Angelina told Dumbledore of her only being able to call up one fleeting image of Draco aiming his wand at her, and surrounding that was total blankness. She told him about her wrists. "But, I still couldn't understand what happened, really, until..." she trailed off.

Dumbledore came to stand at the front of his desk at her side, looking into her eyes intently. "Until what?"

"Until H-Harry told me...what Draco said to him." She swallowed. Harry was coming into the story now. She had not mentioned him before this moment, and now she could see why her instinct had told her not to. Dumbledore's eyes widened.

"How did Harry react to Draco, Angelina?" the headmaster's voice was grave, urgent. Angelina hesitated. She really wanted to be honest. It wasn't her place to withhold information from Dumbledore when she was asking him for his help, but something tugged at her not to divulge everything...she felt it was something of a betrayal to Harry to do so. Was it? Harry trusted Dumbledore above anyone...he

told her so. The professors watching her leaned forward in their frames...listening to every word.

"He was angry," she said quietly.

The headmaster's eyes probed hers...he seemed to be searching for the truth in them. "Naturally, he would be..." he spoke, still studying her. "What I meant to ask, however...did Harry act on his anger in retaliation against Draco?"

The professors seemed to be holding their breath. Even Phineas Nigellus abandoned his caustic attitude and watched the conversation with genuine curiosity.

"He--confronted him, yes." Her heart was threatening to jump out of her chest. She fancied that all of the watching eyes around her could see it, and were counting the seconds until it finally did. She waited for Dumbledore's response. Would he become angry at Harry? Would he demand that she tell him if Harry and Draco were the ones dueling on the pitch that night? Would she walk out of this office having not only gotten Malfoy expelled, but Harry as well? But, then he already knew, didn't he? He had just read the playbook—was he testing her to see if she would lie to him? She opted not to say anything else.

"I see..." was his only reply. He walked back around to his own chair and sat down. She didn't dare feel relieved. The headmaster opened his mouth to speak, but just then Mona Stormcrow appeared in her frame again, looking slightly out of breath and eager.

"I passed on your message, Headmaster!" she informed in a relieved huff. "Ignatius will deliver Professor Snape as quick as you please!"

"Thank you, Mona." Dumbledore did not smile playfully at her this time. Angelina heard her whisper loudly to the neighboring portrait of a fat, bald wizard 'what did I miss?' but her attention remained fixed on the headmaster. He did not, however, speak again until there was a soft knock on the office door several minutes later. The gadgets in the office made their noises, and Fawkes trilled from his perch, but

Dumbledore simply waited, and when the knock came he called: "Come in, Severus."

Angelina turned, feeling her heart go to work on her again, and saw the door open slowly. Severus Snape stepped inside, his black robes enveloping him in shadow. He was carrying a large, stone basin. He stopped just inside and his dark eyes landed on Angelina. She stared at him, not feeling particularly comforted by his presence. She understood Harry's resentment of this man—his gaze on her was less than warm. When Dumbledore stood from his desk, Snape pulled his eyes from hers and inclined his head respectfully.

"You asked for this, Headmaster?" he uttered silkily, his low, deep voice giving Angelina a chill. He lifted the basin slightly in his hands.

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, I shall require the use of the pensieve for a short while tonight. You may take it back when I'm finished."

Snape moved forward and placed the basin...the pensieve...carefully on the desk.

He stepped back and folded his arms; his white cuffs the only break in the wall of black that clothed his body. His slick hair shadowed his face as he frowned at Angelina. "Is everything all right, Johnson?"

The question took her by surprise, and she actually turned her eyes to Dumbledore as if asking permission to answer him. Dumbledore, however, seemed busy inspecting the pensieve thing, his head bowed. She paused, then shook her head. "Not really, no."

It could have been a smirk that appeared on the dark wizard's face, but his next words seemed genuinely concerned. "No? Then something is the matter..." her earlier question about his expression was answered—"you're not having relationship problems with Potter, are you?"

"Severus," Dumbledore stood upright, having finished the inspection of his basin. "I will ask you not to let anyone disturb Miss Johnson and myself for a little while, least of all Professor Umbridge."

"Of course." Snape's smug attitude vanished and he bowed away, turning to stride from the room with nary a second glance at Angelina. It suited her just fine. She was glad Dumbledore had dismissed him before she had a chance to call him a greasy monster. She closed her eyes briefly and when she looked again Dumbledore was staring at her.

"Now, Angelina...I must ask you yet another favor."

"Yes sir."

"Do you know what this is?" he indicated the pensieve. She shook her head, glancing at it curiously. "No, I didn't assume you did. This is a Pensieve. It is, simply put, a vessel for storing and viewing memories."

Angelina's mouth came open slightly and she let out a soft gasp. "You can watch people's memories on that thing?"

"Yes." Dumbledore nodded solemnly. "Also it is used to store memories temporarily. I use it to take a clearer look at things I've already seen and done whenever I feel I should pay attention to details I might've missed by simply relying on this old thing..." he tapped his temple with his slender finger, smiling faintly.

"And...are you going to use it for me?"

Again, a solemn nod. "Yes, with your permission of course."

"But the memory is gone, sir. Draco—he erased it. I can only get small bits and they never get clearer than vague images."

Dumbledore walked over to her side again, shaking his head. "Yes it is unfortunate that young Malfoy used Obliviation on you. But you see...he did not, as you think, erase your memory."

She gaped at him. The professors murmured their agreement, wisely. "But I can't remember..."

Dumbledore's blue eyes shone. "I would have concluded this myself, but for the one thing you told me that gave me the idea to use the Pensieve—dreams, Miss Johnson. Dreams are tools, they are vehicles with which our subconscious transport many, many things. Yes, they are mostly vague, abstract portraits of random things that seemingly make no sense...but in some cases—in your case—they tell us things. Important things."

"What things?"

"That the information has been buried. Very deeply buried. But it is still there, nonetheless, and we shall find it."

Angelina thought for a moment, his words echoing in her mind. She remembered what she had read in those books Hermione gave her, about the mind's resistance of the spell if it were cast incorrectly. "How will we find it?" she asked after a moment.

Dumbledore looked up at all of the portraits surrounding them. "I would like for you all," he addressed them, "to please consider the next few minutes completely confidential, not to be discussed with any of the other portraits, tapestries, or artwork in the castle. What is about to happen should not leave this room. May I have your word on that?"

They all buzzed, looking scandalized but intrigued, and then somebody shouted "Here, here!"

"You have our word, Headmaster Dumbledore, at your service!"

Phineas Nigellus simply gazed on the scene cryptically.

Dumbledore, once satisfied that they had all agreed to his terms, looked back down at Angelina. "Now, Miss Johnson...I want you to try and think back to that night. Though I know it is difficult for you—please try to remember what you were doing before your recollection becomes unreachable..." Angelina closed her eyes and pictured...yes she had been leaving the pitch. Carrying her bag. Thinking of Harry? She opened her eyes again. Dumbledore smiled,

whispered “Ready?” and before she could blink he reached up and clapped his hands together sharply.

The last thing she saw before darkness took her was the crystal blue of his eyes...

When her vision cleared again, Angelina was sitting up straight in the chair, staring strait ahead. Dumbledore was sitting across from her, his expression very grave. The office was again completely silent.

“What happened?” she whispered.

The headmaster sat still for an incredibly long second, and then moved suddenly, leaning forward to shift the pensieve so that it sat between them on the desk. “I’m sorry, I had to put you asleep for a moment. Your dreams, as I suspected, held all the information....”

He held up his wand. Dangling from the tip was a thin, wispy strand of substance that glittered faintly. Angelina frowned at it.

“Is that...?”

Dumbledore deposited the silvery stuff into the basin, where it swirled eerily—almost in slow motion.

“Yes. Please stand, Miss Johnson.” Angelina did as she was told. Dumbledore walked around to her side of the desk and gathered up the corners of his robes in his wand hand, touching her gently on the elbow with his other. He looked into her eyes. “We are about to view the memory that you lost. I am sorry—it isn’t that I don’t believe what you’ve told me, but I’m afraid I have to see this for myself. It will help me determine the correct course of action...”

“But...what about expulsion?”

Dumbledore’s eyes left hers for a tiny second—he glanced down at the basin, and then his brow creased slightly as he looked at her. His next words seemed very carefully phrased. “There are many paths we might take, all of which lead to Draco’s being held accountable for

what he did. But, first...do you wish to come with me, and view this memory? Or would you prefer not to?"

Angelina made the first resolute gesture of the night and nodded firmly. "I want to see it."

The old wizard returned her gesture. "Very well. Now don't be afraid. Simply lean forward, like so..."

He gently guided her forward by the elbow, and they leaned over the basin with the shimmering contents—her memory—swirling around, waiting for them. She felt that she would simply be putting her head in a big bowl full of smoke, but just as her face broke the surface she began to fall.

Angelina stifled a scream as she fell...fell...fell...and then gently touched down on cool, damp grass.

Seconds later Dumbledore came to stand next to her. They were outside on the grounds. The night air was cool and silent. Angelina looked around her, and with a heavy feeling in her chest, realized what she was in the middle of. She saw that they were standing right in front of the tree that she'd described to Dumbledore.

"Are you all right?" his voice startled her and she jumped slightly, turning to him. "We can go back if you wish," he nodded his head over her shoulder, indicating something behind her. She turned to see a faint figure walking towards them in the distance. "You'll be upon us soon, but we still have time to abandon this--"

"No...I need to see this..." Angelina's eyes were glued to the figure approaching them, draped in shadow. That was her. It was completely surreal—she was watching herself advance on them...coming closer. Her own face came into view. Her eyes were unfocused—she was deep in thought. Angelina watched herself move still closer, and then her eye caught sight of something else moving around in the darkness behind the other Angelina. She tore her gaze from her past self and squinted...

"That's--!" She jabbed a finger at the figure, and Dumbledore nodded solemnly.

"Yes, that is Draco."

Seconds later, sure enough, Draco Malfoy's blond head emerged from the darkness. The other Angelina kept walking, completely (frustratingly) unaware that he was behind her. Angelina watched as the boy stuck his hands in his pockets and strolled along silently for a beat, a stupid smirk on his face. She chanced a side-long glance at Dumbledore, who was surveying the scene with a shrewd, no-nonsense expression, before quickly turning back to see what was happening.

"Out for an evening stroll, Johnson?"

Angelina watched herself gasp and whip around to face the boy, who chuckled at her as she dropped her bag to the ground. When the past Angelina noticed that it was only him, she glared at him. "What the hell do you want?"

Angelina's eyes were wide with emotion and Dumbledore's eyes were narrowed grimly while they watched as Draco taunted her. She shuddered every time he sneered, every time she saw the flash of anger in his eyes. And then the scene changed suddenly—for Draco seized Angelina when she was attempting to leave him and slammed her against that tree. The Angelina watching with Dumbledore jumped as she watched her past self hit her head against the bark with a hollow thunk. The headmaster laid a hand on her to stay her, but his eyes remained fixed on the two figures in front of them.

Dumbledore left her side and walked up to the pair of them—where her past self was struggling mightily against Draco as he pinned her to the tree. She couldn't see Draco's face, but Dumbledore was now standing very close to them, and he leaned in to look at the Slytherin boy...Angelina had never seen the headmaster look so angry.

She watched herself kick Draco in the shin and try to make a run for it. It seemed she was going to run right through Dumbledore, but Draco reached up and grabbed her, yanking her to the ground with terrible

strength. Angelina took a few hesitant steps forward, her chest heaving, her eyes watering. Draco pinned her to the ground—Dumbledore watched, still looking upset—and when she slapped him he snarled some awful profanity at her and slapped her right back. This time it was the headmaster, and not his young student, who jumped, only very slightly. They watched as the other Angelina clawed at Draco's hair and shrieked and thrashed around. They could both see his face now, and there was a highly unusual gleam in his pale blue eyes...a slightly curious smile on his thin lips...

"Give us a kiss, first..." he uttered, and Angelina's heart jumped into her throat. "Just one kiss..."

This was the moment that the boy almost gave into a horrible desire, and if she had not been able to get herself from under him, Merlin only knew what he would have done. Dumbledore seemed to recognize this, and his face showed how awfully disappointed and upset he was by Draco's behavior.

Now the other Angelina was fumbling in her bag for her wand. Dumbledore stepped back and watched Draco find his wand first. He disarmed her (she cursed herself silently—Harry had been teaching D.A. classes by then, why was she so slow?), and they stood breathing at each other.

"You...you tried to..."

"O-Obliviate!"

Dumbledore sighed. Angelina was watching Draco's panicked face as he modified her memory, but the headmaster turned to look at her.

"Miss Johnson...Angelina?" He laid a hand gently on her arm as he smiled at her, his blue eyes twinkling kindly over his half-moon spectacles. "I have seen enough."

There was a thrum of hushed, yet urgent and excited whispering that greeted them when their feet touched the floor of Dumbledore's office again. It immediately ceased, however, when the two of them appeared.

Angelina stared at the pensieve. She had known, for quite some time, that if ever she were to recover the full memory of what happened it would upset her. Well that was common sense. But she was a great deal more than upset now. She was furious. She was shaking with anger.

It wasn't just that Draco Malfoy pushed her around, pinned her down, slapped her, and tried to force himself physically on her. It was his attitude in doing so, and in continuing to pursue her as if that behavior was normal. As if she would somehow find that unusual gleam in his eyes attractive...

How she had allowed herself to fall headfirst into his little game of cat and mouse (or more like mouse and cat, only the cat was being a big idiot) was beyond her. She did not blame Harry for not speaking to her. She deserved whatever hard feelings she got from him.

"You cannot imagine," began Dumbledore quietly, "how immensely sorrowful I am that this was done to you, my dear girl." His eyes narrowed and became darker again—she could tell his anger was back. "Or how very, very disappointed I am in Draco Malfoy."

Angelina licked her lips and gave him a faint nod, still seething over what she'd just seen.

"Punishment, Headmaster?" one of the portraits—Angelina looked up to see that it was Phineas Nigellus again—spoke gravely.

Dumbledore was studying Angelina and did not respond right away to the question. They were still standing at the desk, facing the pensieve. The cool shimmer of Angelina's memory danced across their faces. She looked over at him again and he placed a hand on her arm. The second he touched her she burst into tears. A scattering of sympathetic murmuring befell the portraits. Fawkes trilled softly. Even the Sorting Hat grunted forlornly and leaned over a bit on its shelf to survey the wizard and young student. Angelina found herself being held by Dumbledore as she cried.

He patted her up gently, and she closed her eyes against the elegant blue of his robes and the silvery gray of his long beard. When she thought she'd gotten all of her pinned up emotion out of her, she took in a deep breath and he slowly released her. Dumbledore made sure she was steady on her feet before turning and walking around to his side of the desk again. Angelina remained standing as he took his seat.

Swallowing, the seventh year girl asked: "Will you expel him?"

She asked this question, though she knew the obvious answer. Of course—of course that would be done. Headmaster Dumbledore, after what they'd just seen and everything she'd told him, would no doubt turn Draco out of Hogwarts. There really wasn't need for her to have asked the question, but she needed to actually hear him say it. He did not.

Instead, Dumbledore raised his eyebrows at her rather regretfully and shook his head. "No."

Gasps all around. Angelina gaped at him. "What? How can you not—but you've seen--!"

Dumbledore allowed her to sputter angrily; allowed the other professors, who were becoming quite involved in this little drama, to mutter their various feelings on the matter, then held his hand up for silence. Angelina clenched her lips together, breathing hard, her fists balled at her sides. She did not wish to yell at the headmaster—but she was very curious, one could say, as to why he had answered her question incorrectly.

"Angelina, I can see that you are upset," Dumbledore observed, but then leaned forward in his desk, presumably to really impress his next words on her, "but not nearly as upset as I am, I can assure you."

"Then why won't you expel him?!" she had to catch herself. Her heart was beating furiously.

"Because, for one thing, I believe you waited so long to come to me for a reason. I believe that you see something the matter, in Draco's

case, that deserves my attention. To dismiss him now would be also to ignore that something...and it would be a very foolish mistake on my part."

Angelina tilted her head at him. He seemed to have read into the very depths of her mind. He seemed to have been watching, listening to her work these things out. And this was part of why she was so angry—sympathy for the devil was out of the question! But it was there. Like it or not it was there and Dumbledore was right. Angelina had been waiting, she knew now, for someone to help her sort these feelings out. She had felt that Draco needed help more than he needed harsh punishment. She also suspected that the headmaster knew exactly why—and that now he was going to tell her.

"Please, sit down." She did as she was told. The old wizard began slowly, and very simply: "It has always been, since it's establishment centuries ago..." his eyes glinted in the lamp light, "...that this school not only serves as a place for young wizards to learn, but also as a safe haven—a home away from home. Its walls not only offer education, but protection. Its teachers are guardians, and I am...the overseer of each and every student who passes through these halls."

Angelina listened; sure she knew where this was going; captivated by Dumbledore's soft, warm voice.

"I look after Draco Malfoy the same as I have looked after you, or Hermione Granger, or those clever Weasley twins...and Harry..." He leaned forward in his seat again, continuing: "So, I know it upsets you that I have chosen not to expel him, but please believe me my dear when I say that his fate outside these walls is far more terrible than the prospect—for you—of allowing him to remain inside them."

"What is so terrible? What's waiting for him out there?" Angelina swallowed with dread. It was dawning on her—his strange, dark behavior. The way he changed so drastically during the progressing months. The boy was in trouble. "His father is a Death Eater, isn't he sir? And Draco..."

"Draco is in line, it would seem, to become one." Dumbledore finished for her, nodding and closing his eyes briefly. He then told her many

more things...confided in her, perhaps, as his equal. His only note on that confidence in her was that he believed her to be "ready" for the information. He believed that she was a key part in all of the things they talked about, and when they had finished talking, she was running late for the D.A. meeting. He only asked her not to repeat what they'd discussed unless she considered the consequences very carefully. "Only stay close to him, Angelina." Dumbledore requested of her. "Harry needs you. I am still trying to prevent what's happening, or at least stifle it as best I can...I cannot press enough how important it is for him to master Occlumency. He simply is not ready for this—not yet."

"Sir...?" Angelina almost whispered when she had reached the threshold of the office. "What if Umbridge finds out?"

Dumbledore's trademark shimmering blue eyes widened as he looked at her, and he shook his head very slowly. "She must not."

She did not need for him to elaborate. For any knowledge whatsoever that the Ministry gained of what was happening would not only devastate Dumbledore's efforts to protect Harry, but it would also draw Voldemort in to the boy swift as a tide under a full moon.

Angelina left Dumbledore more informed and more determined than ever she'd been during this whole ordeal. When she passed the stone gargoyle, she heard voices drawing near her. She recognized Umbridge's high-pitched simper immediately. Accompanying it was the voice of Professor Snape, what sounded like a very put upon McGonagall, and a voice that sounded familiar yet she couldn't quite place it.

Acting on instinct, Angelina immediately ducked behind an enormous curtain covering the huge double windows nearby. Making sure that her feet weren't sticking out, the seventh year girl stood as still as she could, and seconds later the people whose voices she heard had rounded the corner at the far end of the hall and were now headed her way—towards Dumbledore's office.

"The headmaster has left strict instructions with me that he is not to be disturbed, Professor Umbridge." That was Snape. He sounded very forbidding.

"Oh, did he now?" someone scoffed. She knew she had heard that voice before, but she could not remember where. The voice was haughty and older-sounding, the voice of a man. It had a bit of an incredulous whine to it that Angelina did not like. "Well you shall just have to go and tell him that the Minister of Magic is here—it is a matter of the utmost urgency."

Angelina's vague recollection of the man's voice clicked into place. He was Minister Fudge.

"Minister, what is this about, exactly?" McGonagall was speaking now.

"Oh, you'll see Minerva," Fudge almost chuckled—he sounded very pleased with whatever it was that was going on. "Suffice it to say that Dumbledore and I have unfinished business. Tonight, we shall put an end once and for all to that Potter boy's lies--"

"Professor!" Angelina nearly jumped from the sound of another, new voice. It sounded urgent—excited. It was Draco Malfoy.

"Yes, what is it, Malfoy?" Umbridge purred.

"We've found it, Ma'am. We found the room they're hiding in."

"Oh, excellent!" Umbridge squealed with delight. Angelina thought her heart would jump out of her chest. Her ears burned. Oh no, she thought, panicked. There was no other 'room' Malfoy could be talking about—no other 'they' he could mean. The D.A. had been discovered, she was sure of it. "Minister, if you'd like to go on ahead to Dumbledore, and leave the untidy business of rounding these rule-breakers up to me, I'll be with you in a moment."

"Of course, Delores, of course." Angelina could hear the smug smile on Fudge's face. "Snape, lead the way."

There was a pause (Angelina imagined that Snape and McGonagall were exchanging glances, or that Snape was glaring at Fudge for giving him an order so dismissively), and then the sound of moving feet across the floor. Snape uttered the password and she heard a creaky grinding sound. Seconds later there were soft “clack, clack” sounds on the spiral stairs and then silence.

She waited as long as she dared to make sure the hall was deserted again, and that Umbridge and Malfoy had left. When she heard nothing but silence, the panicked girl threw the heavy curtain away from herself. They were coming to ambush Dumbledore and expel Harry—expel them all. She couldn’t let that happen.

Angelina broke into a run. She had to get to Room of Requirement before Umbridge did.

Chapter Thirty-Two: It's A Roundup!

Harry wasn't really surprised when Angelina didn't show up for the D.A. meeting.

He himself almost skipped it. That probably would've been very rude, though, considering he was leader.

He simply did not feel up for much of anything since what happened. Angelina's absence from his every day life was rather jarring; he'd gotten so used to having her around him all the time that now everything just seemed a little cheerless. He was still very angry with her, but he missed her.

This was more intense than what he experienced at Grimmauld Place. This was his heart's burden of knowing he had found someone to love and that loved him—but who had, despite his finally being able to trust it in her hands, broken it. It sucked something awful. Walking around with a broken heart was a thousand times more painful than walking around with a broken arm. And the really crappy side of it was the reason he felt this way. It seemed, when measured against all the things he fancied might do that to a person, not quite up to scratch. After all, she hadn't cheated on him. Only withheld information—information that made him burn with animosity every time he thought about it...

Harry knew that if Angelina had run right to him the day it happened and told him everything that his reaction towards Malfoy would've been the same, but damn it all the truth was better than not knowing anything. Better than walking around like an ignorant fool. The fact that she kept it from him seemed like more of a betrayal because it implied (at least to him) that there was something lurking underneath her sympathy for that little shit. Harry hated the thought of it almost more than he hated Malfoy.

Also, he was plagued by haunting thoughts of the incident in Snape's office.

What happened to him? And why now, of all times?

When it was over, and he was alone with himself to think about it, he didn't feel any different at all—though he could remember the raw, thunderous anger that he'd felt on the last two occasions he had these strange, unexplainable releases of power. He was afraid to tell Hermione about it. He didn't tell Ron, either. When his best friend asked him how the lesson went he answered as honestly as he could without divulging too much information by saying that it had not gone well. The Potions Master had not mentioned it at all since, and Harry found that almost worse than if he'd been reported to Dumbledore. Actually, he would love to be able to talk to the old headmaster about it, but he kept getting this bothered, nagging feeling every time he considered it. Dumbledore's vagueness this year...his frustrating behavior...put the boy wizard off trying to seek explanation from him. He doubted he would get any sort of straight answer out of Dumbledore even if he did, and what's more—the headmaster had been drumming the same message over and over again in Harry's brain, even though he did it through other people like Hermione and Snape.

Master Occlumency, master Occlumency, listen to Snape, close your mind, do what Snape says...

Hermione's fear was that by neglecting his Occlumency, he was making himself terribly vulnerable to Voldemort. Though she didn't voice it exactly the way Harry thought of it, he could tell that she worried the evil wizard was seeping in; signs of his vicious mood swings were taking hold of Harry. She was afraid that Harry's temper was turning into something that he himself could not control because part of it was not his own, and that by resisting Occlumency for the sake of gaining more information about what Voldemort was up to he was doing far more damage than he really knew. Well, did they think he wasn't scared of the exact same thing? He had a vision where he was the evil bastard's pet snake, for Merlin's sake—and he attacked someone! And it was real, and it happened! And just like that had happened, Harry knew when he dreamed he was Voldemort it was just as real as Mr. Weasley's attack. Voldemort was gaining back his momentum—he was redoubling his efforts to find a way to take this thing...this weapon...and use it against the Order, but none of them seemed to care about that. Hermione dismissed it as something he shouldn't have seen, therefore leave it up to the adults to sort out and

do as you're told. Snape seemed infuriatingly indifferent about this information, and where was Dumbledore?

Pacing in his study. Being silent and mysterious.

So why should Harry tell Dumbledore, if all the headmaster was going to do was cheat him out of discovering anything especially unique about himself by forcing the stifling practice of Occlumency down his throat?

As for Hermione and Ron...perhaps telling them would have been the first thing he'd have done if not for the look on Hermione's face when they'd managed to get him out of his determination to kill Malfoy. If not for Ron's dark, pensive expression when he informed Harry that he was talking in first person while explaining about the Rookwood dream, Harry would confide every detail to his best friend.

Still some small but powerful instinct told him...not yet. Not yet.

Harry had blown up his Aunt Marge once because she was badmouthing his parents. He had dropped Dudley into a snake enclosure because—well because he was Dudley and Harry fancied he deserved it strictly on principle. He shattered glass in Snape's office that time because he'd gotten angry...these things seemed to all be connected in that when they happened, Harry was in a state of upset. Only making glass disappear so that his fat cousin fell through it at the zoo was something far different than levitating a desk, or say...almost killing somebody. And if he could do that, what else could he do? Harry wanted to learn—he wanted to know. This was something he was doing by himself, because he felt he had to.

Secretly, he tried to tap into this power at random times. He tried willing Pansy Parkinson to trip when he saw her in the halls. He tried starting the fire in the common room by staring at it one night before bed. He tried to read Ron's thoughts, tried levitating Umbridge's porridge bowl at breakfast, summoning Hermione's quill while they were doing homework in the library—nothing worked. Nothing budged or bended to his will at all.

That scared him. It scared him because it suggested that whatever this power was, it was only coming to him when he was upset, and when it did he could not control it.

When the Centaur Firenze greeted him right before their first Divination lesson since Trelawney's sacking, he told Harry that he was "changed" and that "a dark tide draws you near, Harry Potter, be careful..." Of course, then the mysterious half horse, half man moved on as though he hadn't said anything at all out of the ordinary—as though telling Harry to beware of the 'dark tide' was a perfectly ordinary thing to do. And if that wasn't enough, he gave Harry another warning at lesson's end concerning Hagrid. "His attempt is not working. He would do well to abandon it. Tell him, Harry Potter."

Harry had done as Firenze asked, and Hagrid had remained just as stubbornly secretive about whatever it was he was up to as ever.

Even though his face was plainly bloodied up, he still insisted that it was just his usual messing about with the creatures he tended in the Forbidden Forest. But Harry had never seen Hagrid so ill-used before. It seemed he was being a lot more careless in whatever he was doing. Harry pledged that whenever he sorted through the current trouble he was dealing with he'd devote more time to investigating what was going on with Hagrid.

At the moment though, it was all a bit too much.

So despite tonight being Marietta-free and despite that tonight they were finally taking a break from their dueling lessons to work on Patronus Charms, Harry found himself out of the mood. Ron and Hermione noticed of course, but luckily the wonder of the Patronus lights and shapes kept everybody else distracted enough that he could brood without much interruption.

"They're so pretty!" Cho Chang, seemingly doing just fine without Marietta at her side, smiled fondly up at her swan-shaped one. It spread its wings, opening its beak in silent song as they all watched.

Harry looked up at it and said patiently, "I'm glad you think so, but that's not what they're for. They're supposed to protect you."

"Well there's nothing attacking us now..." Ginny was trying but failing to conjure hers—her wand shot out faint sparks of light that evaporated before they took any sort of shape. She blew a lock of hair out of her face irritably. "Harry I can't—get—this—to work!"

Harry took hold of her wrist to stop her stabbing the air with her wand and told her to take a deep breath. Frowning, she did as he instructed. "Okay, now...just try to relax. Think of something happy, a memory or something that you really cherish. Focus it..."

He caught the somewhat grateful look on her face as he spoke to her—for these were maybe the most words he'd said to her since the incident in the dungeons. It wasn't that he was particularly angry at her for what she did; he knew that if she hadn't done something to snap him out of it they would all be in big trouble...or Malfoy could've ended up in St. Mungo's or worse...

It was just that she hadn't been on his side, or at least it seemed that way. Harry had been beginning to fancy her as a different type of girl; his friend. He supposed he figured that she would understand his position and not try to stop him from confronting Malfoy. But, she decided to stick by Angelina's side—which was still a pretty decent thing to do for the older Quidditch captain—and leave Harry alone to sort things out by himself. Well, he had Ron. But it still stung a little.

After a few more attempts, Ginny finally got her wand to throw out a spectacular beam of light that formed a giant owl whose big black eyes caused several people to gasp and stare. But the animal simply spread its enormous wings and took flight around the room, matching Cho's swan in its path.

"Wow. That was kind of scary at first."

"Mine's not scary," Hermione spoke up happily, watching her otter-shaped Patronus roll around. "It's kind of sweet."

Harry sighed. "They're not supposed to be sweet, either. Listen—guys...there is a difference between conjuring them in a classroom

with nothing to harm you and conjuring them when a Dementor is trying to suck the life out of you. You need to be aware of that.”

“Yes, Harry’s right, kids.” Fred and George were trying to make theirs (a ‘dirty great ape-beasty-thing’ for Fred and a bobcat for George) do tricks for Seamus and Dean’s amusement. George attempted to drive his bobcat at Fred’s ape. “Let’s not forget, in battle, these beasties could be our last defense—bite him!”

“This isn’t wizard chess, Fred.” Harry muttered, distracted from helping Ron with his Patronus. Both the youngest Weasley brother and Neville were having trouble. Harry thought it unfair that Neville’s miraculous progress in the D.A. had stalled with the Patronus Charm. He wanted to try his best to help the other boy master it. Ron was watching the twins’ futile attempts to make theirs fight, and was absentmindedly flicking his wand about.

Harry became annoyed by this and snapped at him to pay attention.

“Sorry...” Ron cleared his throat and adopted a serious look.

“S’ok, let’s just try again. Neville, you go first. Remember—think of something positive, and it needs to be strong enough to carry the charm.” He and Ron stood back to make room for Neville. After a slight pause, Harry added under his breath, “Like your happiest memory with your parents? That’s what I use...”

Ron looked at him sharply, his eyebrows raised, and Harry thought maybe he’d made a mistake in saying that, but Neville merely nodded and closed his eyes. After a moment, he murmured, “I think I’ve got one,” the corner of his mouth was turning up.

“Good, Neville!” Harry grinned as Neville raised his wand. “Say it nice and clear, now.”

“Expecto Patronum!” Both Ron and Harry were almost blinded by the dazzling spectral horse that galloped its way out of Neville’s wand, shaking its mane fiercely as it ran a path around them.

The other kids in the room applauded Neville, and his round cheeks turned bright crimson but he grinned, raising his wand even higher so that the horse galloped mightily around the room. Then it joined Ginny's owl, Hermione's otter, and Cho's swan, making them look like a strange fleet of animal warriors charging into battle. Fred's giant ape muscled its way along side them all, followed by George's bobcat and a stork that belonged to Lee Jordan.

"Oh...now why can't I conjure up a nice big ape like Fred, then?" Ron complained when he'd finally gotten his to show itself. It was a gazelle that leapt out at them nimbly. He made a disappointed face at it. "I wouldn't have minded a horse or even some'fin in the cat family...like a lion..."

"It looks like a pretty good one, Ron..." Harry said expertly, though truthfully he didn't really know exactly why people's Patronus' took the shapes they did. He didn't quite see the comparison a gazelle had to Ron, or Hermione the otter....maybe Lee Jordan's stork suited him...Harry actually thought the giant owl would suit Hermione better.

"Well I'd rather switch and take Hermione's funny-looking thing than get stuck with this girly gazelle," Ron continued. "This would be better for her, anyway. Can we do that, Harry?"

"Er--I don't think so Ron."

"It's an otter, Ron. Besides Harry's right," Hermione offered confidently, allowing her otter to be chased by his gazelle. "Your Patronus doesn't need to be some mighty beast to protect you. It's the power of your spell that matters. And look—your gazelle is pretty strong-looking in its own right."

"I guess so..."

"Excellent deer, little brother!" George called to Ron.

Ron rolled his eyes, "It's a gazelle, you git," but smiled.

Seamus, who still had not managed to do the Charm properly, elbowed Harry in the arm. "Go on, let's see yours Harry!"

Harry's mood had been elevated in the last few minutes as a result of witnessing so many of them master what he was teaching them, and he felt proud of them all. He was even proud of the ones who still hadn't managed it; they were at least putting a formidable amount of effort into it, and he couldn't ask for better. Giving a good-natured little wave of defeat when they all started chanting Harry! Harry! Harry!— he raised his wand and cleared his throat.

The incantation had not even formed on his lips before the door burst open and Angelina came rushing in, her eyes wide with fear and her hair plastered to her forehead with sweat. She was breathing like she'd run up to the seventh floor from the banks of the lake nonstop, and the first person her panicked eyes landed on was Harry.

She rushed forth into the fray of silent, stunned D.A. members, stopping just in front of their raven-haired leader. Her breath rustled his messy strands. "Harry! You must—I've just come from—they're on their way up here!"

"What?" Harry lowered his wand and stared at her, fear creeping up his spine and into his throat. "Angelina, what are you talking about? Who's coming?"

Angelina took a deep breath to calm herself, the emotion in her eyes pouring into him. "We don't have much time. I ran as fast as I could...Harry, Umbridge knows about the D.A.! Draco's leading her—she's coming for you, she's coming for you all!"

Harry glared at her for a beat, letting the information sink in, and then turned to regard the room full of staring kids. He shook his head quickly, gaping at them. "WHAT ARE YOU ALL STANDING THERE FOR?" he bellowed, causing several of them to jump. "RUN! GO!"

The whole room sprang into action. Kids went flying at the exit from every direction, the brilliant light from the many Patronuses now fading away, leaving a considerably darker atmosphere in its wake. A cluster of bodies formed at the door, and Harry found himself side-by-side with Angelina at the back of the urgent queue.

"How do you know this?" he hissed at her, stowing his wand in the holster she'd given to him that was strapped to his side.

She shook her head frantically, her watery eyes plastered to the door at the front of the line. "I-I was on my way from Dumbledore's office and I overheard--"

"And how did Malfoy find out?" Harry couldn't help the accusatory tone in his voice, even through his alarm and worry.

"Harry, I don't know!" she snapped right back. "I heard his voice. He's helping her, and it was lucky I ran into Dobby or I wouldn't have gotten here half as fast as I did!"

Harry was suddenly overcome with a very strong urge and he seized her and embraced her, hugging her tight before letting her go and snatching her hand in his. "Whatever happens, don't let go of my hand, okay? If we can just get to the library or one of bathrooms down the hall...we can pretend we've been in there the whole time. It's still twenty minutes to curfew..." his nervous reasoning seemed to have caught on in the mass of escaping D.A. members. The word spread fast as orders from Harry, and by the time he and Angelina had pushed their way through the narrow door, he saw them all running as fast as they could to safety. He felt a surge of hope that they might still be okay—everyone had listened to him and weren't going to be stupid enough to try and make it all the way back to their respective common rooms.

"Run for the girls' toilets over there!" he heard Hermione say to Cho Chang as the two of them bolted around a corner, followed closely by Ginny and Luna.

He pulled Angelina behind him, hurrying towards the stairs nearest them; hopefully they could make it to the library just on the floor below them, where Neville and Ron were headed. But before he had run five paces he felt something catch him about the feet and he flew forward, hitting the marble floor hard. Angelina's hand slipped from his grasp as he slid several feet on his stomach before coming to a halt when he hit the wall that held Barnabas' tapestry. His wand had somehow come loose from its holster and was lying near his feet.

"Trip jinx, Potter!" Draco Malfoy's voice called nastily, and Harry twisted around on his back. "You stay down, now, or I'll have to jinx you again..." Malfoy had come out of his hiding spot at the base of an ugly iron vase and was now walking towards them, a hateful gleam in his blue eyes, his wand aimed at Harry.

Angelina had stopped in her tracks, her eyes glued to Harry's sprawled form with terror. When Harry saw her standing there he couldn't help himself; he bellowed: "Run, Angelina! Get out of here--!"

"Don't you move, Johnson!" Draco ordered.

And then the unmistakable clack, clack of heels on the marble was growing near. Draco smiled triumphantly, almost beside himself with satisfaction, as Umbridge rounded the corner behind him. She was out of breath, but her eyes were positively lit with greedy determination as they landed on Angelina, then Harry. She squealed grotesquely, her plump face flushed pink like that of an evil queen pig. "Oh, this is excellent! Well done, Malfoy! Fifty points to Slytherin, you have redeemed yourself tenfold!"

"Thank you, Ma'am." Draco sneered at Harry, who glared right back at him, wanting nothing more than to finish the job he started in the dungeons.

Pansy Parkinson came in Umbridge's wake around the corner, followed by Crabbe and that Tom Hacking kid.

"You three get your friends and round up the others. They'll have run for the nearest hiding places—look for anyone out of breath in the library or the lavatories...quickly, now." Pansy nodded and led the way as Umbridge surveyed Angelina contemptuously before seizing her by the arm and thrusting her at Draco. "Hold this one for me, Malfoy. Take her wand."

She smiled sweetly as Angelina struggled in Draco's hands.

"Oh, don't bother resisting young lady. You should know better than to get yourself mixed up with a miscreant like Potter and his little gang of trouble-makers."

Umbridge turned her malicious gaze on Harry, now. She walked toward him, the fire in the pits of her eyes burning brightly.

"Mister Potter...get up." Harry did as he was told, his whole body heavy with the weight of knowing that because of him Angelina would be expelled, along with Ron and Hermione and Neville and over a dozen others. Umbridge clasped her stubby fingers around his arm like a vise after scooping up his wand and pointing the way with it. "Let's take a little stroll down to the headmaster's office, shall we?"

The walk through the castle to Dumbledore's office seemed endless.

Harry's arm grew numb under the pressure of Umbridge's hold on him. He stared straight ahead, his mind reeling with worry for his friends. He felt so bad—Hermione would be devastated, Mrs. Weasley would probably murder Ron and Ginny, poor Cho didn't deserve to be expelled, and Neville had been getting so good...

Malfoy strutted along with his filthy hands on Angelina, every now and then smiling to himself. Harry forced himself not to look at them, but stared ahead of him the whole time, his mouth clamped shut and his nostrils hot with his coarse breathing. His wand hand itched, his heart pounded, and his arm throbbed. He willed himself to feel the power that coursed through him when he confronted Malfoy in the dungeons. He thought of everything—fire under Umbridge's shoes, Malfoy's leg to suddenly splinter, a giant tidal wave to come crashing down the hall towards them, drowning both his enemies and leaving himself and Angelina to swim to safety...

Umbridge marched him right up to the gargoyle, sang the password and then up they went on the spiral stair. They paused outside the office, where Harry could hear several voices coming from inside.

"You wait here with Malfoy, Miss Johnson," Umbridge ordered Angelina. "As for you, Potter..." She did not bother to knock, but

strode straight into the office, toting Harry like a prize kill, her bosom swelling with triumph.

Inside, all eyes immediately turned towards him as they entered.

The office was full of people. Cornelius Fudge stood by the fireplace beside Dumbledore's desk, glaring at Harry with wicked delight etched all over his unfriendly face. An aggravated-looking Professor McGonagall stood stiffly next to Dumbledore, who was sitting calmly at the desk and was the only one not looking at Harry. Percy Weasley, Ron's big brother who Harry hadn't seen since his hearing at the Ministry, stood on the opposite side of the desk across from Fudge. He was apparently there to take notes, and he was looking at Harry without an ounce of sympathy. Snape was there as well, and the sight of him gave Harry a jolt of unpleasant memory concerning the last time they'd been in the same room together without there being a potion to make or a passage in a textbook to read.

When Umbridge shoved Harry into the middle of the room he turned around slightly to glare at her and saw Kingsley Shacklebolt, an Order member, standing with another unfamiliar-looking Auror on either side of the door like guards.

"Potter." Fudge almost purred, causing Harry to turn and face him. He was rocking on his feet, his hands clasped behind his back. "Well, well, well..."

"I'm having the other culprits rounded up as we speak, Minister." Umbridge spoke up, happily. "I just thought I'd bring Potter to you straight away."

"Very good Delores; very good!" Fudge gave Umbridge a nod of approval before turning his nasty gaze back to Harry. "Do you know why you are here, Potter?"

Harry glared at him, defiance coursing all through him, and he returned the minister's nasty look. He opened his mouth, prepared to say yes he bloody knew why he was there—but he caught sight of Dumbledore mid-breath. He was not looking at Harry still, but the boy could've sworn he saw the headmaster shake his head faintly. Acting

on instinct and nothing else, Harry recovered and instead of saying 'yes' he uttered, "Yeh—No."

The echoing sounds of voices could be heard through the heavy door to Dumbledore's office, where only minutes ago Angelina had been talking with the headmaster about not expelling the boy that now stood before her.

The small corridor that separated the spiral stair from the office door was dark and narrow.

When Umbridge left them alone, Angelina caught Harry's eye. He did not look happy; he looked as if he wanted nothing more than to attack Malfoy again and this time not be stopped for pity. She didn't blame him. During these moments, as she stood alone with Draco Malfoy, there was a very strong feeling in her that perhaps she had made a mistake in going to Dumbledore. Perhaps Professor McGonagall would have been the better choice. Even though the headmaster had explained himself, explained why he chose to keep Draco at Hogwarts, and why Occlumency was so important for Harry...this information did little to comfort her now.

Angelina stood as close to the opposite wall from the stair, near the door, as she could. Draco simply watched her, every now and then cocking his head to the side to try and hear what was going on in the office. She stared at him, though she too tried to hear what was going on inside. After a few moments of silence, Draco moved abruptly and closed the space between them. Angelina instinctively went for her wand, but it wasn't there—he was carrying it. Instead of going for her, however, he pressed his ear to the door, his mouth open in what looked like surprise and amusement.

"Good grief, Potter is actually denying it..."

Angelina lifted the corner of her lip at him in disgust.

"It's a shame..." he muttered, now turning to look at her. She stared at him, not able to sort out the extreme feelings of loathing for him and fear for Harry simmering inside her. He continued, "I really didn't

want you to go down too, but I guess that's what you get for sticking around with losers like Potter."

Draco smiled, turning to lean against the door on one side and crossing his arms casually. Yes, he had definitely changed...he seemed older to her standing here so close. His eyes—they seemed heavy with some kind of intensity she had never seen before, not even when he cornered her in the tunnel. Even when he attacked her—it was more of a panicked, uneasy Draco who cast that Memory Charm than the calm, ominous-looking Death-Eater-In-Training that stood before her now. He was mocking her, sure, and he was behaving every bit as spitefully as ever, but there was something...considerably darker...about this boy in this moment that caused Angelina to let the loathing win over the fear.

"You're a sick little bastard, you know that?"

He frowned at her, narrowing his eyes darkly. "You thought I was going to sit back and let Potter get away with what he did?" His tone lost its teasing sarcasm and turned to real malice. "You thought I would let him humiliate me in front of his stupid friends...attack me like the fucking thug he is and then just slip away quietly?"

Angelina noticed him coming closer and she stood steadfast. She would wait until he tried to touch her again...and then knee him good in the balls. Since she was going to be expelled by Umbridge anyway, she didn't see the point of holding back her desire to do this little twerp physical harm. Once he was down she could grab her wand and hex him into puss.

Draco stepped closer. "And then that rat ran his mouth in that ridiculous rag of a paper about my father and you think I'm supposed to ignore that?" Another step. She clenched her jaw, waiting...he smiled at her again. "Did you notice something?" The younger boy whispered. "Did you notice that Umbridge is back in my corner? With her on my side again, I can get away with anything." Draco shrugged casually and crossed his arms again, his movement toward her now stalled. "I admit my first idea wasn't very smart..."

The ominous look invaded his eyes again.

"I learned from that mistake..."

"How did you find out about the D.A.?" Angelina demanded before she could stop herself.

His smile grew and he actually laughed quietly. "You guys are priceless. Potter is truly very dim—he should know better than to kick someone out of a secret and illegal club for disagreeing with him..."

She didn't catch his meaning right away, but when she did she felt her hatred of Draco (and her dislike of Marietta Edgecombe) increase tenfold. Angelina wanted to kick him, but just then she heard Fudge raise his voice. They both paused to hear, but the shouting stopped. She turned to Malfoy again with a new approach.

"Your little secret is out..." she uttered viciously.

He lost his smile. "What secret?"

Angelina took pleasure in adopting that smile; she had seen him wear it on so many occasions, and now it was her turn. Even though she knew that nothing had really changed but the passing of information, she wanted to see the intensity in his eyes turn to fear. She wanted to make him feel the way she was feeling—Harry was inside being expelled, and so if Angelina couldn't do anything to help him or herself at least she could wipe that smirk off Malfoy's face.

"I told Dumbledore about you," she almost whispered, watching his features change slowly, "tonight."

"You—what?" Draco let his arms fall to his sides and he raised an eyebrow at her. It seemed he had grown confident (and comfortable) knowing that she could never tell on him. "What did you tell him?"

"He recovered my memory." Angelina's resolve to needle him intensified and she stepped forward when she saw the Slytherin boy's eyes widen in disbelief. "You didn't erase it like you thought you did—you screwed up the spell. He and I watched it together."

"You're full of it..." his voice was barely above a whisper, but his face was now completely drained of color.

Angelina shook her head slowly. She took another step forward. "No—he saw everything you did. Harry isn't the only one in trouble tonight."

Draco breathed, seemingly taking in everything she was telling him. Traces of the panicked boy on the moon-lit path that night were surfacing again.

"Don't try to trick me because you've run out of options, Johnson," he recovered, shaking his head at her in mock disapproval, though the apprehension in his eyes was clear. He clicked his tongue at her. "It's not very becoming. A girl as feisty as you shouldn't resort to lying your way out of a situation..." there was a mischievous undertone to his statement.

It gave her an idea as she recognized the gaze he was giving her then.

Angelina was the one closing the space between them now. She stepped up to him slowly, and he watched her come. "I'm not lying, Draco. I came to him tonight during dinner and told him everything." As she spoke, she moved even closer until she was mere inches away. He swallowed, his eyes drifting down to her mouth. Inside she was repulsed by his ability, even at a time like this, to focus on her sexually when she was telling him that Dumbledore knew he had attacked her.

Still...if she could just get her wand...it was tucked in the folds of his robes.

"He read what you wrote in my playbook..." she breathed, leaning into him. He exhaled. Her stomach tightened, but she inched her leg closer. Draco didn't seem to be listening to her—his eyes were glued to her lips and he was leaning in. What in bloody hell was wrong with him? "He read...every...single...detail...how you want me. How you

wanted Harry out of the way so you could have me...and you still want me, even now, don't you?"

"Yes..."

Their lips were touching slightly—his cold and damp, hers soft and warm. She looked into his eyes for a second and found that he was completely transfixed by her. With a jolt of anger, she shot her knee up and it caught him in the crotch. He groaned and doubled over but when she went for the wand his hand shot out and he grabbed her wrist.

With a furious grunt Draco jerked her into himself and held her fast. He was strong. Stronger than she remembered...

"I knew you had that in you..." he breathed on her.

She twisted madly in his arms, and opened her mouth to scream for one of those head hunters in the office (or better—Harry) to come out and catch this creep, but he had his tongue in her mouth before she uttered a sound. He kissed her deeply, harshly, almost desperately...her breath was taken away before she began to resist, feeling as if she would explode with anger. Angelina pulled away with all her might and lunged for her wand but he leapt back. Before either of them could do anything further, Umbridge came out of the office and Draco backed up from the door out of her way.

"Malfoy, go and fetch Miss Edgecombe, will you? I'll take Johnson from here."

Draco looked to Angelina apprehensively before nodding and heading off, taking her wand with him.

Umbridge turned to her and smiled. "Won't you join us, Miss Johnson?"

Harry didn't see how he could go on pretending.

He supposed Dumbledore's intentions were good, but he just couldn't think how he would escape the noose now that Umbridge had

revealed she'd been tipped off. He stood there, watching Fudge's frustration melt to triumph again, and his heart sank. It was over. Whoever Umbridge had under her sleeve, they'd told her enough to chuck him for sure. His first instinct was that it was Malfoy she was going to fetch. Though he couldn't think how the rat had found out so much.

Angelina stepped into the room behind Umbridge when she returned. She looked at Dumbledore first, then Harry as she walked to the middle of the office to join him.

"Who is this young lady, Delores?" Fudge asked, raising a curious eyebrow at Angelina. "Is she the one who...?"

"Oh no, Minister," Umbridge tittered sourly. "She isn't the informant. No, she is just as guilty as Mister Potter here. She is one of the members of his illegal group."

"Alleged illegal group," Dumbledore corrected softly. He smiled. "We still have not established whether or not these secret meetings continued after the initial gathering in the Hog's Head."

Angelina stood by his side, looking angry and a little upset. He knew by the look on her face that she'd probably had words with Malfoy in the hall, and it made his blood boil. Maybe it would be best if Harry were expelled because then he would be free to carry that little shit into the Forbidden Forest and dump him in Arogog's lair.

Fudge snorted at Dumbledore's comment and narrowed his eyes at Angelina. "So, what do you have to say for yourself, young lady?"

Angelina stared at him. Harry's heart rate sped up—he hoped she had caught onto what was going on. He hoped she realized after what Dumbledore said that Harry was denying ever holding the D.A. meetings after the Hog's Head thing.

"About what?" she asked blankly. Harry internally thanked her, but he didn't rightly know what good could come of her participating in this obvious lie. Umbridge's informant would be there any moment, and then what would they do?

Fudge rolled his eyes impatiently and Umbridge shook her head. "Come off it, girl," the horrid woman leered, her eyes flashing threateningly as she addressed Fudge: "She's in a courtship with Potter, Minister. She'll probably stick to anything he says rather than save herself some dignity by telling the truth."

McGonagall snorted. "Are we expelling students for their personal involvement with each other, now?" She looked down at Dumbledore in mock confusion. "Is that what we've been brought up here past curfew for?"

"Now, Minerva," Dumbledore admonished her gently, his eyes fixed on no one but Angelina. "I don't think Professor Umbridge suggested that at all. She is simply implying that these two students are not telling the truth."

"They are not, Dumbledore, and you're very foolish to try and help them talk their way out of this!" Fudge exclaimed, apparently incensed by the headmaster's nonchalant attitude. He turned again to Angelina and dropped all pretense of a forgiving demeanor. "Don't pretend ignorance, Miss--what is your name?"

"Angelina." Angelina continued looking at him as if she hadn't the slightest regard for what he had to say. "Johnson. Sir."

"Right, well Miss Johnson, surely you realize that Potter cannot be saved—his arrogance will surely be your downfall."

"Sir, I don't know what you mean. We weren't doing anything--"

"Think of your parents, girl!" Fudge raised his voice angrily at her. "Do you really want to shame them by getting expelled trying to protect this boy?"

Harry spoke up before Fudge could continue, despite himself. "She isn't trying to protect me. I didn't do anything wrong." This he truly believed—he'd never done anything more right, in his opinion, than starting the D.A.

"Potter, perhaps you should do yourself a favor and refrain from speaking." Harry turned, slightly surprised, at the sound of Snape's voice. He was standing near Angelina, regarding the boy coolly. Harry first looked to Dumbledore, then Fudge (who had been on the point of speaking), then back to the dark professor. "Every word you say only incriminates you further...and I must say I'm finding myself disinclined to believe any of it."

Harry couldn't (well, no, he could) believe that Snape would side with Fudge and Umbridge right in front of Dumbledore, who was trying to help him. McGonagall looked scandalized as well, and her eyes narrowed at the Slytherin Head of House.

"Quite right, Professor Snape..." Fudge agreed uncertainly after a moment, clearing his throat. "Be quiet, Potter. We'll find out soon enough who's telling the truth. After all, there's nothing like a good witness, is there Dumbledore?" he raised his eyebrows maliciously at the headmaster.

Dumbledore didn't speak. Nor did he look at Harry. Harry did as he was told and clamped his mouth shut, fuming. Angelina was quiet as well. In fact, nobody said anything else until someone knocked on the door a few minutes later. Draco Malfoy stepped in, and Harry had to fight the urge to seize him by the throat before he muttered, "Here she is, Professor..." to Umbridge and stepped aside for—Marietta Edgecombe.

Harry's mouth came open but he quickly shut it again as the realization of what happened hit him hard. How could he have been so thick? That's what he got for listening to bloody Ron! As he watched her move into the office, guided by Umbridge who'd taken back Angelina's wand from Malfoy and dismissed him, the levels of his thickness began to hit him in waves.

Cho.

Cho said Marietta didn't like Zach Smith anymore.

She said 'M' and there was only one 'M' that Harry could think of right now who fit the equation. He's probably off snogging his other

girlfriend and talking about what an idiot you are! Cho had said to Pansy on Valentine's Day.

And the person behind that curtain the night Harry almost strangled Malfoy to death? Yes...as Harry looked at Marietta, a lump the size of a Snitch now in his throat, he knew for certain that it had been her lurking behind there.

Probably Malfoy had been coming back from one of their snog sessions. Probably seeing Harry attack her new love interest (Merlin, it was disgusting—how could anyone find Malfoy attractive?) as viciously as he did confirmed her belief that he was dangerous and violent. Probably she ran to poor, suffering Draco's aid and when that ferret mentioned getting back at Harry she jumped at the chance to hell him about the D.A. like the whining traitor she was.

And Harry could see that she was at least paying for it. She had her hands covering her face as Umbridge led her to stand in front of Minister Fudge, and Harry found cruel pleasure in knowing that Hermione's jinx had marred her.

"It's all right, dear." Umbridge attempted to guide the girl's hands away from her face. "I'm sure the jinx has worn off by now. Why don't you tell the Minister what you told me?"

When Marietta finally lowered her hands, Fudge jumped back in shock, catching his robes on fire as his feet landed in the fireplace. The girl whimpered in embarrassment. Every pair of eyes were on her now. Once the Minister recovered from the shock of seeing the word SNEAK spelled out across her face in giant purple pimples, he stamped out the smoking hem of his robes and listened as Umbridge explained that Marietta had come to her that afternoon to tell her about the D.A.

"She told me that there was to be a secret meeting of an illegal dueling club tonight, and that if I were to proceed to the seventh floor at eight I would find Potter and the other members hidden there."

Umbridge waved her hand irritably at Marietta's face, which the girl had covered by drawing her robe up to her eyes.

"Of course, before she could say more this jinx began to take effect, and I had to waste time trying to find wherever this hidden meeting place was located on the seventh floor, but I had help with that."

"I see, and who helped you discover them, Delores, if this girl—what's her name?" Fudge frowned, staring at Marietta rudely.

"Marietta Edgecombe." Umbridge informed. "Her mother works at the Ministry, sir. She is one of the Floo Regulators and she's been helping me keep an eye on the fires here at the school."

"Ah, now your mother will be proud to hear you've assisted the Ministry tonight, young lady!" Fudge exclaimed, his smug grin spreading. "If Miss Edgecombe was overcome by this...rather horrible jinx...who helped you find their meeting place?"

"Draco Malfoy volunteered sir, along with some of his other peers. In fact, it was Draco who first heard from Miss Edgecombe about the meeting and brought her to me."

Harry's theory had been confirmed, and he bit the inside of his cheek.

"I see. Well, I shall have to remember to tell Lucius." Fudge turned on his heels to face Dumbledore. "So, what do you say to that, Dumbledore? I'm betting you can't talk your way out of this one!"

Dumbledore nodded graciously and turned his gaze on Marietta. Harry waited, a hitch developing in his side from holding his breath, to see what exactly the old man would say at this point. "I thought—forgive me if I've misunderstood—that our purpose here was to determine whether or not there have been secret meetings going on for the last six months? That would certainly be a violation of the decree banning unauthorized clubs."

Umbridge scoffed. "Have you not been listening, Dumbledore?" she asked, a little out of her place, Harry thought. "Why do you think I've brought in Miss Edgecombe?"

"Oh can she tell us about six months worth of meetings? I understood her testimony was that there was one happening tonight, not any other time." He raised his eyebrows at the girl expectantly.

Just as Harry was feeling he'd run out of slack and would no longer be able to continue the charade, he felt the air change suddenly. He heard a faint sound, like barely audible words being spoken by someone...and the air around his midriff moved faintly. Harry had the very distinct impression that Kingsley Shacklebolt, who was standing directly behind him at the door, had said something...an incantation.

And the warm, soft push of air that went breezing past him was a spell...but why would Kingsley do that?

Umbridge turned to Marietta, who suddenly seemed a great deal more relaxed about her position here as a snitch in the middle of a room full of teachers, Dumbledore, and two of the people she'd ratted out. "Miss Edgecombe," she said sharply, her voice rising so that everyone could hear her clearly. "Tell me—how long have these meetings been going on? Isn't it true that Potter has been illegally teaching you and a dozen other students to duel for the last six months? You don't have to speak. I'm sure a simple nod of your head won't make the spots worse."

All eyes were on Marietta. Harry watched her carefully. She shook her head no. Umbridge faltered a little, turning quickly to look at Fudge, but recovered herself.

"W-What exactly does that mean, dear?" she asked, somewhat harshly.

"I thought it was clear," McGonagall spoke up. "She answered your question, no Delores. There haven't been any secret meetings for the last six months." As McGonagall spoke, Harry thought he heard the whisper again, but he couldn't be sure. He didn't dare turn his head to see if Kingsley's mouth was moving or not. He was beginning to feel pin pricks all over his neck, so apprehensive was he about what was happening. He knew that any moment someone would surely notice what he had. He could feel Snape's gaze on him...

Umbridge ignored McGonagall. "Miss Edgecombe—tell the truth, now. You have nothing to fear, you're not in trouble. Just tell me...you were going to these meetings, weren't you?"

Marietta shook her head again, her robes still clutched up to her eyes tightly.

"It seems asking her the same question more than once has done little to change her answer." McGonagall said in mock-surprise. Dumbledore didn't attempt to hush her sarcasm this time.

Umbridge turned to regard McGonagall with the acid glare of a caged snake wanting desperately to attack. "Thank you for your observation, Minerva..." she said through clenched teeth, her round cheeks turning bright red with frustration. "But allow me to offer some insight as to why this girl is afraid to speak freely here. Never mind that someone has cruelly placed her and the rest of the members under this jinx to prevent any of them from having even the faintest glimmer of conscience!"

"And what insight is that, Delores?" McGonagall responded, putting her hands on her hips and raising her eyebrows.

Umbridge's smile—that ubiquitous, slimy-sweet smile—crawled across her face as she uttered, turning to Harry: "It's Potter. It was his idea to start up this dueling club, where he has no doubt been teaching all the students involved Merlin knows what kind of violent spells."

She took a step forward, towards Harry, who stood fast and glared at her. He felt Angelina touch him at the top of his wrist, but his eyes remained fixed on Umbridge's.

"He has been rallying them against you, Minister," she said with an almost irrational air of accusation in her voice. "He has been teaching them Dark Arts, haven't you Potter?"

"Delores--?" Fudge started, looking from Harry to Umbridge in disbelief. "Are you saying...?"

"Oh yes...." The woman almost purred, stepping still closer to Harry slowly. "Yes I know it—I've seen what they did to the Quidditch pitch. Don't you try to deny it, Potter. You had them out there battling the night away, didn't you? You probably had them learning whatever dark thing you could snatch from the Restricted Section in the library!"

"Delores, you must be sure of such things before you--" Fudge was looking nervous because he was quickly realizing that they were losing the upper hand as her accusations grew more and more far-fetched.

She did not seem to heed his warning, but continued advancing on Harry. She stopped very close to him and though she was just barely his height, she seemed to tower over him evilly. Harry was feeling the dread seize up his limbs and close off his throat. He knew what she would mention next...

"Miss Edgecombe is afraid, Potter, because you have her under your thumb. You've threatened them all, haven't you, boy? I've seen the darkness in you, in my office, you did something...unnatural...and you were teaching them all to do it as well--!"

"That is quite enough!" McGonagall raised her voice. She turned to Dumbledore, who was merely staring at Umbridge just as everyone else was, though his gaze was somewhat more perceptive than others'. "Headmaster, you don't intend to let her accuse Potter of practicing the Dark Arts, training other students to do it, threatening them to keep quiet about it and who knows what else she'll come up with next!"

"Oh is it enough, Minerva? Is it?" Umbridge seemed to have become extremely agitated, she whirled around to face Professor McGonagall again with her eyes wide, anger etched into the round curves of her face. "You all stand around and let this boy manipulate you and lie to you and you believe that he is innocent?" She jabbed a finger at him, her pink fingernail almost catching his cheek. "I have seen with my own eyes what danger he poses to this school! Am I the only one willing to expose him for what he truly is?!"

"Be careful, Delores..." Dumbledore stood up from the desk, his eyes flashing a warning. "I think Professor McGonagall's right—that is enough."

To everyone's utter astonishment, Umbridge actually laughed at Dumbledore. "You're blind, Dumbledore, if you can't see what this child has been doing right under your nose--!"

"Delores, please, get control of yourself!" Fudge snapped.

"What about you, then?" Harry spoke up suddenly, adrenaline beginning its thunderous course through his stiff body. He had been standing there listening to Umbridge rant about him being some kind of evil sorcerer in training; a teenage version of Voldemort, basically; his temper had been rising steadily all the while. He no longer cared what any of them had to say or what they would do to him. "You sent Dementors after me last summer!"

Her mouth dropped open and so did Fudge's. Dumbledore turned sharply to look at Harry for the first time.

"I-I—you—Minister, he's lying--!" she sputtered, her face growing still more crimson with anger.

"No I'm not!" Harry shouted. Angelina had closed her hand around his forearm now to hold him steady, but the presence of her cool fingers did not calm him. He could feel his fury beginning to tremble within him as he continued. "I know you got Lucius Malfoy to help you convince the Dementors to come after me and my cousin that night—I heard you and Draco talking," he told her viciously, almost ecstatic with the triumph of calling her out in front of her precious Minister Fudge. "You did it so you could shut me up, so you could get me expelled for underage magic—and you got a Death Eater to help you!"

"Potter, don't stoop to her level by trying to out do her with crazy accusations," McGonagall warned quietly, though she sounded as if she believed him.

"That isn't true, Delores." Fudge said, flabbergasted, and it sounded more like a question than a statement.

"No it is not!"

"Yes it is!"

Umbridge gave a sharp cry and seized him by the collar of his shirt. She began to shake him violently, and he clawed at her chubby hands in effort to get her to release him. "You wretched little liar!"

"Get off me!"

"Delores, take your hands off of him, now." Dumbledore strode from around his desk, his wand drawn, his eyes ablaze. He looked angry for perhaps the first time since this whole thing began.

"DELORES, STOP!" Fudge rushed toward them, prying her shaking hands away from Harry's neck. She waved them around as if she'd been burned by something hot, shaking her head and attempting an apologetic smile.

"Oh! Oh, I'm sorry Minister!" Umbridge gave a pathetic little laugh. "I-I forgot myself..."

"Calm down, Madam Umbridge..." Kingsley's deep voice could be heard fully now as he stepped up to Umbridge and gently backed her away from Harry. "You don't want to hurt the students..."

"No...I didn't mean to..." she said breathlessly.

Marietta stood still and calm, her eyes fixed on the fire behind Fudge. She said nothing, nor had she even flinched while all the shouting was going on. She seemed barely to notice when Umbridge pounced on Harry.

Fudge sighed heavily and closed his eyes for a brief moment, as though asking a higher power for patience. "Delores—can we please get back to what we came here for? The illegal society that Potter

formed...do you have proof beyond this girl's now recanted testimony that it existed under the decree banning them?"

"Um...uh..." Umbridge took a deep breath to calm herself. "Y-Yes. As a matter of fact, I was getting to that part before Miss Edgecombe..." she narrowed her eyes, but trailed off. She reached into her pocket and withdrew a folded piece of parchment. As soon as Harry saw it he knew what it was. "I have here a list of names. Apparently, one of them tried to take it with them knowing it could be used as evidence to apprehend them, and in their haste to escape punishment they dropped it. I found it on my way to get Potter."

She opened it and handed it to Fudge. He stared at it, a sour smile spreading on his face. "My, my...Dumbledore's Army?" He snorted. "Oh this is too good..."

"As you can see, Potter's name is the first on the list—and it goes on to name all of the perpetrators involved."

"Oh no..." Angelina whispered in his ear. She hadn't spoken at all since Fudge interrogated her, and the sound of her voice so close took him out of his fixed gaze on that piece of paper that Hermione had scribbled on months before.

He turned his face to hers—she was standing very close to him now and he hadn't even noticed it until that moment. Their eyes met...but he turned away to look at Dumbledore, who had taken the list from Fudge and was now staring at it. There was heavy silence for a long pause, as Dumbledore's eyes read over the list. Then he smiled suddenly, handing the parchment back to the minister.

"Well the ruse is up." Harry started, confused, but Dumbledore's smile grew and he shrugged simply. "Would you like a written confession, Cornelius, or would a statement here now suffice?"

Fudge looked as confused as Harry felt. "A—what? A confession?"

"Yes!" Dumbledore seemed almost cheerful. "You've seen it for yourself, there is nothing I can say or do to hide it now. Dumbledore's Army...not Potter's Army..."

"Headmaster," Snape spoke up again, his voice somewhat alarmed.
"Are you sure you wish to--?"

"Yes, Severus, I'm sure," answered Dumbledore firmly. He then brightened again and said, "I confess, Cornelius!"

"You mean...?" said Fudge slowly as it dawned on him. "You mean you--?"

"Me." Dumbledore confirmed.

"—organized this whole--?"

"I did."

"—and you have been plotting against--?"

"That is correct."

"You recruited these students for some kind of army against the Ministry?" said Fudge stupidly, apparently still in shock from the headmaster's confession.

Dumbledore tipped his head from side to side patiently. "Not quite. I recruited them for an army against Voldemort—but if the Ministry still chose to stand in our way, turn a blind eye to the signs of his return—then so be it. Tonight was to be our first meeting, but I can see now that it was a mistake to invite Miss Edgecombe, what with her mother being an upstanding employee of yours."

"Dumbledore, you crackpot!" Fudge shouted, seemingly torn between anger at Dumbledore and elation that he'd confessed at last. "You still think that he's--! You're plotting to overthrow me, and you try to lure students into your delusion that we're all in mortal danger of some ridiculous return!"

"So, you'll arrest me now, will you?" the headmaster asked calmly.

"NO!" both Harry and Angelina shouted.

Both Kingsley and McGonagall flashed them looks of warning but Harry didn't pay them any attention.

"Professor Dumbledore, no!"

Harry felt a powerful surge of emotion course through him just then as he realized what Dumbledore was doing for him—the fire violently blazed forth suddenly, Fudge yelped and jumped away from it, and Dumbledore turned sharply to look at Harry.

"Harry do not let your anger get control of you...be quiet or I shall have to ask you to leave," he said this very softly and Harry got the odd feeling that Dumbledore knew something about what was going on inside him.

"Yes Potter, be quiet!" Fudge ordered him, licking his lips as if famished and staring at Dumbledore like he was a four course meal. "Be glad your crackpot old fool of a headmaster has finally confessed! He's saving your hide, boy! I came here expecting to expel you Potter, but this..." he wheezed his laughter.

"Yes, you get to arrest the 'crackpot old fool' instead, Cornelius. Funny how the tide turns, isn't it?"

Harry stared at Dumbledore, but the old man was not looking at him anymore. His heart thumped hard, Angelina's grip on his arm was tightening, and he felt himself slipping into angry defiance. Dumbledore was giving himself up to save Harry, and those two vultures were eating him up. Fudge barked at Percy to make sure that he had recorded everything Dumbledore had confessed, and with an impish gleam in his eye he announced that news of what happened would be on the front page of the Daily Prophet come morning. Then he motioned for Kingsley and the other Auror to step forward.

"Shacklebolt, Dawlish—arrest him." Fudge ordered. "You'll be formerly charged at the Ministry tonight, and then taken to Azkaban to await trial for treason, Dumbledore."

Harry balled up his fists. Fawkes made a sound from his perch—Snape, whose arms had been folded across his chest as he looked on the scene, now lowered them to his sides as his eyes drifted down from Dumbledore to Harry.

“Ah, I thought we might hit that little snag...” Dumbledore said softly.

Fudge scoffed, “Snag? What snag, Dumbledore?”

Very quietly, the moving gadgets sitting all around the office began to stop their motion one by one. Harry felt he ought to do something—this wasn’t right. No way could he stand by and let Dumbledore be sent to Azkaban for him. No way could he let Umbridge and Fudge win out...let that wench get away with sending Dementors after him and putting her hands on him.

Snape was staring at him hard. Marietta seemed to snap out of whatever trance she’d been under and she turned her head to look at Harry as well. Everyone else was watching Fudge and Dumbledore.

“Well, it seems that you are laboring under the delusion that I’m going to allow you to simply take me in.” He shook his head. “I have no intention of being sent to Azkaban, and I dare say you’ll find it a tough job trying to force me to do so.”

“Why you arrogant old--!”

“I don’t have time to waste submitting to your formal charges, or being carted off to prison—where, incidentally, it would be no trouble at all to break out—and frankly I can think of many other, more productive things I could be doing.”

Fudge sputtered angrily for a beat before clamping his mouth shut and drawing his wand. He looked over to Kingsley and Dawlish again before turning back to Dumbledore. “So you intend to take on two Aurors, Umbridge, and myself single-handed do you?”

Harry saw the Auror Dawlish reach for his wand slowly. Harry didn’t have a wand. The gadgets around the office began to move again, but not in the various ways in which they ticked and whirred before—

the one closest to Dawlish was now floating six or seven inches from its table. Marietta's eyes went wide as she watched the heavy, silver thing that belonged to a set of medicine grinders steadily rise above her head.

"Well not unless you are foolish enough to force me to!" Dumbledore answered good-naturedly.

"Arrest him!" Fudge shouted a split second before the silver grinder flew past Dawlish and hit the wall over the fireplace just above his head. It left a dent there. The portraits, who had for the most part been silent through this whole encounter, gasped collectively.

Snape took several deliberate steps towards Harry, but Dumbledore now had his wand drawn as Dawlish and Shacklebolt closed in. Two more of his gadgets flew across the room out of nowhere, cutting across Snape, and by then Harry was gone.

"Dumbledore, you're only—making this—worse for yourself!" Fudge shouted between dodging the flying objects.

Angelina realized what was happening, and it seemed so did Umbridge. For just as she was beginning to shake his arm to snap him out of it, Umbridge's eyes widened in recognition when they landed on Harry's face. More things zoomed out at them—books flew off shelves, tables fell over, and more heavy gadgets started one by one to propel themselves across the room.

McGonagall leapt forward from the desk and seized all three students, pushing them to the ground for safety.

"Stop him!" Fudge was saying, still trying to aim his wand but having to duck every five seconds as more things hit the walls around him. The fire roared again. "Shacklebolt, disarm him now!"

"It's...it's not Dumbledore..." Umbridge muttered, staring at Harry with a mixture of fascination and fright. "It's not him, it's POT--!"

But she was cut off when a silver streak of light flashed, blinding them all. There was a loud BANG and then Fawkes was off his perch,

screeching shrilly as more silver light shot around the room. Seconds later the office was filled with a cloud of dust, there was a scream and then one after the other—thud, thud, thud—bodies could be heard hitting the floor after each streak of silver light from Dumbledore's wand.

When Harry's vision and senses came back to him, he inhaled and coughed loudly for the dust surrounding them. He looked over in surprise at McGonagall, who still had him, Marietta, and Angelina crouched to the floor. She was breathing hard, her eyes flickering all around the office for any sign of movement.

"Are you all right?" Dumbledore's tall figure emerged from the settling dust, Fawkes soaring around the office above him.

"Oh my goodness!" McGonagall breathed a sigh of relief and got to her feet. Harry and the girls rose with her. "Yes..."

Harry looked around the office. Dumbledore's desk had been overturned and the fire had died out. There were pieces of the shattered instruments everywhere. He gazed at the still figures of Umbridge, Fudge, Kingsley, and Dawlish lying slumped on the ground.

"I had to hex Kingsley, unfortunately. It would've looked very suspicious if I'd left him standing. He acted very quickly with Miss Edgecombe," he said, reaching out to grasp Marietta's shoulder gently. "I'm grateful to him. Everything will be all right, Marietta."

Harry knew he was referring to the spell that Kingsley had done on her—he realized that he had probably modified her memory while everyone was looking the other way. Dumbledore released Marietta and turned back to McGonagall.

"Now you must act as if no time has passed or they'll know we had time to talk."

"Of course." McGonagall swallowed, looking at him gravely. "Where will you go, Albus?"

"I'm not going into hiding, Minerva, if that's what you're asking. I think Fudge will find that dislodging me from Hogwarts was a very foolish mistake. He'll see; before this is all over...he'll wish he'd never done it. No—I must go and finish what I started."

Snape appeared at Dumbledore's side. "Dumbledore..."

The headmaster turned to face him and they looked each other directly in the eyes. "Severus there is something I shall need you to do for me. I cannot speak about it now—there isn't time—but you will hear from me soon. It's very important."

"Yes, sir..." Snape's gaze fell on Harry and he stepped back, staring at the boy shrewdly.

"Professor Dumbledore..." Harry whispered. He didn't know what to say. He wanted to convey how grateful he was for what the headmaster had done for him, and he wanted at the same time to tell him every single detail of everything he'd done and seen and dreamed about this year—because it was hitting him that Dumbledore was leaving and there was no telling when or if he'd come back.

Dumbledore reached out and pressed one hand to Harry's forehead and his other took hold of Harry's arm before the boy could say another word.

Harry's feelings of guilt and gratefulness snapped away upon being touched and were instantly replaced by an extreme hatred that turned his stomach. He knew it wasn't his own, but he felt it simmering underneath what he knew to be his true feelings towards the old wizard. It was painful, having those hands on him, and it shot through his scar as he felt for a second time that terrible desire to strike at the man standing before him.

Dumbledore's shining blue eyes burned into Harry's and he spoke next very softly but very urgently, his hands still on Harry's skin.

"Harry...do not let your anger control you. Listen to me—you must practice Occlumency as hard as you can, do you understand? Do

everything Professor Snape tells you and try your best to close your mind before you sleep to avoid bad dreams. I know it seems like you've gotten no answers from me—" those familiar words escaped his lips, "—but I promise you that you will come to understand why I ask you to do this soon enough."

The Auror Dawlish was waking up.

Harry was beginning to calm as Dumbledore held him. He felt the snake-like longing to attack fading and the pain in his scar eased. Dumbledore's touch grew cool and Harry's unnatural hatred towards him melted. Dumbledore looked at him with some kind of emotion that Harry couldn't quite place—he only knew it was strong.

He let go of Harry and backed away, past Snape. "Remember...close your mind Harry...don't let it control you..." And with a tiny wink at Angelina, Dumbledore reached up and grasped one of Fawkes' talons and was gone in a flash of red flame.

Chapter Thirty-Three: On Your Own

Dumbledore was gone.

When Angelina saw the headmaster pass on an ‘important something’ to Professor Snape, she was filled with alarm. She wanted to call out to Dumbledore before it was too late; plead with him to speak to her before he disappeared and did not come back. Surely he wasn’t asking Snape of all people to watch over Draco in his stead? Should she tell McGonagall? Should she tell her now, even though Dumbledore expressly forbade her to speak of what they’d discussed to anyone?

Fudge jumped to his feet, coughing for the dust, and Dawlish followed him. Kingsley got up too and helped Umbridge from the floor.

“Where is he?” shouted the minister, his eyes wide with alarm.

“He can’t have Apparated—no one can inside school grounds.”

“Well find him! Go, go!” Kingsley and Dawlish sprang into action, running out through the office door in a tornado of black Auror’s robes. Fudge angrily brushed off the front of his waistcoat, and without looking up at her he uttered to Umbridge, “Delores, I’m afraid we’ve had a disaster here.”

“Minister?” Umbridge’s eyes did not seem so fiery with maliciousness now, and her ever-present smile was nowhere to be found. She was gazing at the minister apprehensively, her chubby hands clasped together under her bosom. “Are you--?”

“Your behavior...”he finally finished dusting off his waistcoat and looked up at her, shaking his head slightly. “If Dumbledore hadn’t finally confessed to plotting against me this whole operation would’ve been a farce!”

“I rather thought it accomplished that goal without her deplorable behavior...” Minerva McGonagall spoke under her breath, her hands still resting protectively on Angelina and Marietta’s shoulders.

Fudge rounded on her, cocking his head from side to side scornfully. “Minerva, you are in no position to mock me or my staff. Your man Dumbledore has really done it this time—when we find him, he’s finished!”

“Oh I am sure of one thing, Minister,” McGonagall continued boldly. “...he most definitely is not finished...”

Umbridge spoke up then, regaining some of her authoritative posture despite Fudge’s rebuke. “Perhaps you might remember that you are on probation, Professor McGonagall.”

The two women stared at each other. Angelina could see that Umbridge was trying to save face in front of the minister, and McGonagall did not seem to care if she were fired on the spot. But then the older of the two women relented, smiling sourly and nodding her head. “Perhaps you’re right, Delores. The last thing Hogwarts needs at the moment is the loss of another teacher.”

“You’d better get those two to bed,” Fudge said after a pause, gesturing with his bowler hat at Harry and Angelina. He narrowed his eyes at Marietta. “...and that one to the hospital wing.”

“Fine. Come with me now, you three...” McGonagall was turning them around, leading them to the door.

Angelina looked over her shoulder to see that Fudge was now addressing Snape. “If I am right in thinking that you support the Ministry, Snape, then I can expect you to let us know if you hear anything about Dumbledore’s whereabouts?”

“If I could inform you...” Snape replied. Angelina noticed Harry ball his fists again. “But I doubt the headmaster would choose to reveal such information to me. I am, after all, only a teacher here.”

“Right. Well...” Fudge cleared his throat. “...if you’ll kindly leave me with Madame Umbridge alone for a moment. There’s something we need to discuss, Delores.”

Angelina heard the tone in the man's voice and saw Umbridge clench her breath. Then the awful woman's beady eyes landed on Harry before Snape strode towards them, blocking her view. They left the office and descended the spiral stair, McGonagall leading the way with Marietta in tow. Angelina followed and Harry was in step behind her. When they had passed the stone gargoyle and were a ways down the hall around a corner, McGonagall abruptly stopped walking and cursed loudly.

"Unbelievable!" she shouted, her nostrils flaring. "The nerve of that—that...devil of a woman!"

Marietta jumped a little and took two steps back, her robes still pulled up to her eyes.

"Professor--?" Angelina spoke up, thinking that maybe now...but McGonagall rounded on Harry.

"Potter." Harry stepped up along side Angelina when McGonagall said his name sharply. He hadn't spoken at all since Dumbledore vanished and Angelina was worried that at any second his turbulent anger would surface again.

"Yes ma'am?"

McGonagall strode up to him, leaving Marietta hovering near the edge of the corner they'd turned. "Tell me now—was there any truth at all to what you said about Umbridge sending those Dementors after you?"

"Yes," said Harry forcefully. "I heard her say it herself. She was talking to Draco Malfoy's dad that night he came to the castle. He helped her."

"You were eavesdropping, then." They all turned to see Snape rounding the corner.

"Who cares if he was eavesdropping or not?" Angelina piped up. "He heard her admit to it. And did you see the way she reacted when he

told them? She went crazy—she wouldn't have done that if she were innocent!"

"Be that as it may," Snape responded frostily, his dark eyes burning into Angelina's, "Potter still has no proof of it."

"I believe him, Severus." McGonagall spoke, her stern tone causing Snape to look up from Angelina at her. She nodded at him slowly, her eyes conveying her wish for him to be with her on this. Then she turned again to Harry. "But he has a point, Harry. We cannot simply go on hearsay."

"But--!" Harry started angrily, and she hushed him with a sharply raised hand.

"No buts. Professor Snape is right, we need proof." Harry was on the point of protesting again but just then Draco Malfoy rounded the corner, stopping short when he saw Marietta and Snape. He looked from their faces over to where Angelina, Harry, and McGonagall stood. Angelina instinctively inched closer to Harry, prepared to try and settle him in case he went after the other boy. "Yes, what is it, Malfoy?" McGonagall spoke to him first, impatiently.

"I was looking for Professor Umbridge," the boy answered without a trace of humility. "We're having trouble rounding up the others—a lot of them have outnumbered my friends on the eighth floor..."

McGonagall snorted. "There's no longer any need to 'round anyone up' tonight, Malfoy. Do you think you could manage to take Miss Edgecombe to the hospital wing without losing your way?"

Malfoy blinked at her as if she'd spoken a foreign language and then turned to look at Snape again. "Sir?"

"You heard her, Malfoy, get lost..." Harry snarled.

"Be quiet, Potter!" Snape snapped before waving Malfoy off. "Take her, Draco. And then I suggest you get yourself back to the dungeons as well."

“Yes sir...” Draco’s face folded in anger as he glared at Angelina and Harry. He hesitated, casting a side-long look at Marietta before gesturing for her to follow him and turning to disappear again around the corner. The girl hesitated but with a reaffirming nod from McGonagall, she left them in his path.

“Severus, perhaps you wouldn’t mind going to send the others back to their dormitories?”

“And I suppose you expect me to ignore that you are exchanging conspiracy theories with two students who, right up until our headmaster sacrificed himself to save their sorry hides, were illegally participating in a dueling club?”

McGonagall narrowed her eyes at him. They flickered over to Harry and Angelina before she spoke.

“I expect you, Severus, to remember where your loyalty lies. Are you honestly saying that you support that awful woman? That you wish for her to become headmistress of this school?”

Harry and Angelina stood aside, watching them.

“I am loyal to Dumbledore, of course.”

“Could’ve fooled me...” Harry muttered under his breath, drawing a sharp look from Snape.

“What was that, Potter?”

“I said—” Harry spoke louder, his eyes blazing rebelliously. “—you—could’ve—fooled--!”

“Harry, do not speak to Professor Snape that way.” McGonagall interrupted him harshly.

“Oh, no, Minerva, by all means let him finish. Let him tell me his simple-minded view of my supposed treachery!” spat Snape angrily. Harry looked as though he wanted nothing more than to shout back, but he only glared. “Oh, nothing to say now, eh? Of course not. That’s

your way, isn't it Potter? You'll throw your wild accusations around first and prove them later, correct? You see Minerva; this is exactly why you should not take this boy's careless ravings to heart."

"I'm supposed to sit on my hands, then? Allow Umbridge to continue--!"

"Dumbledore is not a fool; he doesn't need your help with Umbridge. He needs you to do as he asks, and as of now he only asks that you remain here as you have, nothing more."

"And what has he asked of you, Severus?" McGonagall's voice was tight with resentment.

Snape raised an eyebrow and stared at her for a beat, but did not answer. He instead turned to glare at Harry. "Our lessons again tomorrow night, Potter." He was gone a second later, his black robes trailing him.

McGonagall closed her eyes for a moment and rubbed her temples. Angelina really wanted to say something to her about Draco, but after all she'd just witnessed, it was a little hard to think of a way to broach the subject. The Professor opened her eyes again and sighed. "You two, listen to me—there are things going on here that I wouldn't expect you to know anything about," she paused, smiling slightly despite her urgent demeanor, "...or maybe you know more than I give you credit for. But the fact is that losing Dumbledore has been a serious blow. Without him...the future for Hogwarts is very grim indeed. Do you understand?"

They both nodded.

"Umbridge is a brown-nosing, opportunistic tyrant and she is out to rid this school of anyone who opposes her. I have never supported her being here, and neither has Dumbledore, everyone knows that. She's gotten rid of him; she's trying to get rid of you—and to do that without interruption I'm certain she'll come after me."

Angelina was beginning to feel a cold, thin line of dread creep up her spine as the professor spoke. She was speaking to them both not as her students but as her allies.

"What do you want us to do, Professor?" asked Harry. "I told the truth in there, but Fudge didn't believe me. You saw."

"I don't think Minister Fudge is entirely in her corner anymore after that outburst of hers. He'll support her—he has to, they've gone too far for him to shun her now, but if we could only get proof of her corruption..."

"You mean like getting her to confess?" Angelina spoke up finally.

McGonagall considered her for a moment before nodding. "Something like that, yes..." She crossed her arms and turned her attention back to Harry. "Listen, it's way past curfew and you two have class in the morning. You should go and find your friends and get yourselves to bed."

"But what about Umbridge?"

"You let me know if she tries anything with you, Harry. Anything at all. I don't know how long I'll be able to protect you, but I promise you as long as I am here I'll defend you, understand?"

"Yes—Professor?"

"Yes?"

"What if...what if she finds a way to get you out, too?"

"I'm afraid then it'll be up to you to make yourself heard, Potter. I'm telling you this because even though I've done as he's asked, I've never truly supported Albus' concern that you needed to be protected from knowing the truth."

"The truth?"

Angelina knew McGonagall was surely aware that anything she said would be witnessed, but for some reason got the distinct impression that what she said was meant for them both, and not just Harry. “You thought I didn’t notice what you did in that office, Potter?”

The hall they were standing in was completely silent and the torches shuddered as if a breeze had disturbed them for a split second. Angelina saw Harry’s eyes change—as though he were very close to something he hadn’t been able to reach in a long time. Information. Answers. Who were they to overlook Professor McGonagall all that time? Angelina was beginning to believe that had she gone to this woman in the first place, things would’ve turned out much differently.

“When Albus and I made the decision to leave you with those Muggles, it wasn’t without a significant amount of concern. It has always been clear to us both that you’d been touched by a power so...great...” She shook her head as if at a loss for words. After a pause in which Angelina and Harry both grew tense with anticipation, she continued. “That mark you carry with you—it is the mark of a terrible curse, made by You-Know-Who.”

“I know that.”

“Yes, you do...but what you didn’t know—what we are all beginning to see—is that it did much more than leave a scar, Potter.”

Angelina looked to see Harry’s chest rising and falling rapidly. “...did what?”

“I don’t know exactly,” McGonagall shook her head sadly. “Neither of us did. But as you grow older, like Albus correctly predicted, the signs of You-Know-Who’s mark on you grow more and more unmistakable—you are far stronger than you realize.”

“I’m cursed?”

McGonagall closed the space between them and put her hands on both their shoulders. “Listen to me—I know two things for certain: first...I think it’s wise that you do as Dumbledore says and practice your Occlumency, if only to break this...dangerous...connection to

him.” She looked at them both in turn before continuing, “And second...the best people to rely on are each other. You’ll need your friends, Potter. You’ll love them and they’ll love you—that is important. That’s why I have no problems speaking about these things in front of you, Angelina.”

She gave their shoulders a squeeze.

“You are not cursed, Potter. What you are is on your own.”

He looked up at her sharply.

“But didn’t you just say that...?”

“What I mean is that Dumbledore is gone, and if that woman somehow gets rid of me, too...you are not a fool, Harry. And neither are you, Angelina. You are capable. You have proven that by taking an initiative and starting that club.”

Harry and Angelina exchanged glances. “We broke the rules...” Angelina muttered.

“I got Dumbledore tossed out....”

“Yes, it’s unfortunate for us all that it had to happen like that, but Albus would rather see himself away from this place than see you put in harm’s way, can you understand? He felt proud that you were teaching yourselves—he felt reassured by your devotion to our cause, and your ability to persuade others to join the Light.”

“So...” Harry shook his head several times as if to clear it. When he finished his sentence, his tone of voice was filled with sudden understanding. “So Dumbledore knew all along about the D.A. then?”

McGonagall smiled. “Of course he did.”

After reminding them again to come to her should Umbridge try anything else, McGonagall urged them to bed.

Harry was silent and thoughtful on the way back over to their part of the castle. Angelina walked along side him, her mind also teeming with thoughts on the events of the night. She didn't feel any better about anything since going to Dumbledore. On the contrary, now things were even worse than they'd been before. She had been too late for everything. Too late turning Malfoy in, so now Dumbledore was gone and Umbridge's hold on the school would be undisputed. With Malfoy in her corner again, it would be hell to try and get him out now. Too late getting to the Room of Requirement, so now the D.A. was history. She'd run into Dobby on her way and the little elf had obligingly helped her find a hidden shortcut up to the seventh floor. But even though they ran like the dickens all the way up there it did no good.

When she and Harry reached the common room, they were startled out of their silence and thoughtfulness by a wide-awake Gryffindor Tower.

It seemed that the commotion of the D.A. members' return had roused the rest of the students. The lights were bright and the noise was deafening. A chorus of voices met them when they stepped through the portrait hole. Angelina recoiled slightly as every head turned towards them and then a collective "Harry!" erupted zealously from the mass of sloppy hair and wrinkled pajamas. Harry stared at them all as the crowd seemed to surge and swell before it produced Ron and Hermione, who squeezed through impatiently to the front.

"What happened?" they both shouted in unison. They looked flushed and disheveled.

Angelina opened her mouth but Harry answered first. "They tried to arrest Dumbledore—he's gone," was his grim reply.

"What?" Hermione gasped, her hands flying up to her mouth. The crowd seemed to settle down a bit, and more D.A. members began to pop out—Ginny, Neville, Dean, and the twins fought their way to the front to face Harry and Angelina. "So Umbridge did catch you?" Hermione said through her fingers.

"Yeah..." Harry sighed. "She and Malfoy took us to Dumbledore's office. She had the Minister of Magic waiting."

"Blimey..." someone (it sounded like Seamus) whispered from behind Fred.

"What did they do? What did Umbridge say? Why did they try to arrest Dumbledore?"

Harry's eyes swept over the crowd...they were all waiting, their commotion settling and their eyes wide with anticipation, for him to tell the story. He sighed again heavily and cleared his throat. "Fudge tried to arrest him for treason. Because he confessed..." he trailed off, his throat closing with regret at the thought of it, before giving in again to their expectant looks, "...he confessed to trying to raise an army here in the school."

A collective gasp, followed by cries of anger or shock. Ron's mouth fell open. "You're joking."

Angelina shook her head. "Dumbledore took the blame for us, and Fudge couldn't wait to arrest him. He didn't even care about Harry anymore after that happened. He ordered the Aurors--"

"There were Aurors?" someone gasped excitedly.

"Yes, there were Aurors..." said Harry dismissively.

Angelina continued, "He ordered them to arrest Dumbledore, but Dumbledore resisted and there was all this fighting--"

"They fought? How many were there? Did Dumbledore take them all on by himself?"

An outbreak of speculative murmuring started in the crowd, and Angelina was drowned out.

"There must've been dozens of them!"

"No, no, you git—maybe like three, but not dozens."

"The Minister of Magic travels with at least six Aurors for protection, my dad told me!"

"Professor Dumbledore took on six Aurors all by himself? But he's so....so...old!"

"He's the most powerful wizard in the world, apart from You-Know-Who, innit? He could take them, no problem."

Angelina stopped talking, seeing that they no longer needed for her or Harry to fill them in—they seemed determined to do that themselves. It was just as well. She didn't think she could've told them everything anyway, as it would reveal some things best kept secret except to those directly involved. The crowd parted, still buzzing, and the D.A. members huddled together under cover of all the talking. "Tell us what really happened," Hermione whispered, and the others murmured the same.

"It was that goddamned Marietta Edgecombe!" Harry started at once, his voice a vicious hiss. "Somehow or other Malfoy shacked up with'er and she ran her mouth to him about us. Umbridge brought her in as an informant."

"That little--!" Ron growled, but Hermione shot him a look.

"You're the one who wanted to kick her out, Ron."

"Yeah, but you all agreed with me!" Ron's cheeks flushed with anger. "We took a vote on it, remember?"

"That doesn't matter now," Harry said over them. "She doesn't remember a thing anymore because that Shacklebolt bloke Obliviated her and altered her memory. She doesn't remember any of the meetings."

"Oh my goodness..." Hermione shook her head slowly, her eyes wide with the scandal of it all. "Did he have to do that?" Her gaze flickered toward Angelina empathetically. This was not lost on Harry, but he continued.

"Yeah, he kinda did. Well—at least I guess he thought he should do something. But Marietta wasn't talking much because she was scared she'd get more ugly pimples. Good jinxing, by the way, Hermione."

Harry spared her a grin and she muttered 'thanks'.

He told them everything else—from Umbridge's outburst at his accusation to McGonagall's promise to help him find a way to prove it. He also told Ron, Hermione, and Ginny about what he had done to the office. Hermione grilled him for every detail. He answered her questions first in whispers as the other students around them continued to talk amongst themselves—throwing wild theories around about the many different ways Dumbledore could've defeated the six or seven Aurors. After a couple of hours, though, the sleepy Gryffindors began to trickle away in small groups back to bed, still murmuring. Harry looked up shortly after to find that the only people remaining were the D.A. members Neville, Ginny, Dean, Seamus, the twins, Angelina, Ron, and Hermione.

Fred was telling Harry and Angelina what happened to them all when the two of them were caught by Umbridge.

"That Montague git chased us up to the eighth floor, but we got the drop on him and shoved him into the Vanishing Cabinet up there." Fred chuckled and exchanged a high five with his brother. "You should've seen the look on his ugly face! Priceless, it was."

"When he comes out of there, you guys are going to be in big trouble!" Hermione scolded them.

"Nah..." George replied nonchalantly. "He won't turn up for weeks, probably. And then who knows where he'll come out?"

"Besides," added Fred, "We don't really care much about that anymore..."

"About what?" Ron asked.

"Getting in trouble," answered George.

"Especially now that Dumbledore's gone..." finished his brother.

There was a moment of quiet and then Hermione sighed. "Well we narrowly escaped, the four of us, didn't we Ginny?" Ginny nodded, her eyes unfocused as she stared at the hearthrug. "Cho actually hexed Pansy Parkinson from behind one of the stalls in the toilets, and well then we had to make a run for it because she was furious after that..."

"We ended up on the eighth floor with them," Ginny nodded in the twins' direction. "But we didn't know you guys stuffed somebody in a cabinet."

"What happened to you guys, Ron?" Harry asked. "I saw you and Neville making a run for it."

"Oh we tried to get to the library, but had to turn 'round because that Goyle fellow was comin' up after us." Neville answered.

Ron went on to explain that what really happened was just a game of hide-and-seek. All of them knew they were goners (at least the ones still out in the open who'd been deterred from finding safety), but they ran from Umbridge's squad of henchmen simply on the need to try every possible escape before finally giving in. They were dashing about in all directions, seemingly trapped on the seventh floor. Henchmen were trying in vain to catch them—hexes and jinxes were thrown at random. People hid behind the tapestry, the huge vases and the curtains. People tried to get back into the Room, but in the end the fight moved upward.

"Somehow or other we all ended up on the eighth floor..." Ron muttered, shrugging. "Me and this lot—we got chased up there, it just seemed like the place to go for some reason. We couldn't go down because they had that blocked. We heard the girls' voices up there so we ran for it."

"Then Parkinson and that Hacking kid came up after Crabbe and Goyle." Dean told Harry. "But there were more of us than them, so we

kinda formed a circle around them.” Both he and Seamus laughed. “It was wicked cool...”

“We would’ve really given them a good fight, too, but that tosser Snape came up and screamed at us all.” George finished the story.

“He said if we didn’t get back to our common rooms by the count of three he’d turn us all into spotted slugs or horny toads or some such things.”

“Wish I could’ve been there...” Harry muttered. “I’d have shoved Malfoy in that Vanishing Cabinet...”

Declaring themselves exhausted, the boys all decided it was time to turn in. Angelina stood up with Hermione and Ginny, but she didn’t move towards the stairs. Hermione leaned closer to Harry, who was sitting on the couch, staring off into space, and said quietly, “I really think we should talk about what happened some more, Harry. I have some more questions--”

“Can they wait until tomorrow?” Harry asked her wearily. “I’m kind of tired...”

“Oh. Of course. Sure...” Hermione stood upright again and made to follow Ginny, who was already moving up the stairs, but turned back uncertainly to raise a finger at him. “We’ll talk first thing tomorrow?”

“First thing.”

“You’ll try and get some sleep, yeah?”

“Yes.”

“And--”

“I know, practice my Occlumency, right?”

“Eh...right. Okay.” There was an awkward pause, in which Hermione seemed to notice that Angelina was hovering, before a look of

understanding landed on her features. "I'll leave you alone, then. G'night."

Harry was getting a headache.

Hermione left him, and almost immediately he lowered his head to his hands and closed his eyes. He squeezed them shut; hoping the darkness and the silence could still his aching brain. During the whole ordeal, he'd gone through stages of upset—from panic and despair to outrage—and now it was catching up with him as he sat by himself on the plush crimson sofa. He breathed in and out, feeling the aching swell painfully before receding again as he covered his eyes and forehead with both hands. Harry concentrated on his breathing...in and out...in and out...and a second later he felt cool fingers in his hair.

He looked up to see that Angelina was there, standing over him in the dark.

"Oh..." he whispered, letting his hands slip from his face as she ran her fingernails soothingly along his scalp. "I'm sorry, I forgot you were there." He sighed and she moved her hand in an exquisite way that made his whole head tingle.

"I'm here..."

He had closed his eyes again but now he opened them and looked up at her. Her expression brought him back to reality.

"Will you sit?"

Angelina took her hand away and sat down next to him on the couch. He leaned back against the cushions, staring straight ahead. The clock on the wall ticked slowly against the silence. She knew he was tired. She felt exhausted as well, though not nearly as on edge now that things had settled down a bit. She realized then that this was perhaps the longest amount of time that they'd been alone together in weeks. Angelina had an overwhelming desire to let all of the things she'd wished to tell him during the time they'd been apart spill out of

her mouth. But truthfully she had no idea where to begin it. She settled on saying very clearly how she felt at that exact moment.

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

“For not getting there in time,” she answered softly. “I tried, I just—oh I feel like it’s all my fault.”

“Don’t blame yourself, all right? They would’ve gotten to us eventually. If not tonight, then...” He felt himself unable to finish—the thought of it, of them...it was enough to make him angry again and he did not desire another headache. Harry fell quiet again and Angelina didn’t attempt to speak more. They were sitting close to each other; their hands almost touched. The silence between them was not empty—in it Harry and Angelina were encumbered by all the things they wished to tell, but their mouths wouldn’t part for relief. Harry stared hard at the empty fireplace whilst Angelina’s eyes wondered to look out the window, where the blue-hued, starlit sky cast a pale stream of light into the dark common room.

How could he confess that he still really loved her? That he loved her more every day even, but every time he looked at her, every time he saw Malfoy...every time the other boy’s name was even mentioned...he wanted to break something? Smash it to bits. And how could she tell him that she was wrong? It was as clear as day now to her that McGonagall’s words made so much sense. Yes Harry had friends, and Harry had Dumbledore in the past to protect him and caution him, and Angelina tried to do that too, but that would not do. That wasn’t her role in his life. He loved her because she wasn’t any of those people, didn’t he? And all she had to do was be there for him. She didn’t like to think this—didn’t like turning away from everything that Dumbledore had guided her towards, especially since he trusted her with such important information, but...she didn’t think now, as she sat next to him, that keeping things from Harry was protecting him at all. It was crippling him.

She felt something brush against her fingers and she looked down to see that his hand was closing around hers. Angelina’s gaze rose to

meet his. Harry opened his mouth, his green eyes burning like embers in the dark, and closed it again. She saw his chest stiffen.

"What is it?"

"...do you...want to stay with me tonight?" he asked in a barely audible whisper.

Angelina felt her heart skip a beat as she looked into his eyes...the emotion she found there was so raw and genuine that it rendered her speechless and she could only nod slowly. Did this mean he had forgiven her finally? He looked so in need of her just then. She could not and would not deny him. Angelina wanted so much to be with him, this boy...oh this boy...of course her answer was yes.

Harry's hand gripped hers tightly for a brief moment, and he saw the reflection of the thin light coming in through the window in her brown eyes. That familiar, heavy rush of longing seized him and he let go of her to stand up from the couch.

"Wait there a minute."

Angelina watched him move out of the light and disappear quickly up the stairs. She sank herself into the comfortable softness of the couch pillows, folding her arms to hug herself tightly. She was vaguely aware of the swimming desire gathering in certain places that, when coupled with the anxiety and sense of despair that tonight's events had produced, made for an odd mix of feelings. As she waited she also realized that sooner or later they would need to talk. But when he returned and looked at her again this notion faded away.

He was carrying his Invisibility Cloak. "Come here."

Angelina frowned and stood up, thinking that they were going somewhere. Harry watched her coming, and when she was close enough to him he reached up suddenly and draped the cloak over their heads. It billowed down on them softly until they were covered with it. The hem stopped just at Angelina's ankles. "What are we--?"

Harry leaned in and kissed her before she could finish. His lips pressing on hers felt so good; it took her breath away. He parted her lips with his vigorously and seconds later his warm tongue was inside. He closed his arms tightly—possessively—around her as he guided her towards the couch. Just like the cloak shrouded them and hid them in the darkness, Angelina's desire and longing shrouded all her unrest from this dreadful night. They moved carefully back to the couch and he adjusted the cloak around them again as he lay down on top of her, already erect. Harry kissed her on the lips tenderly, almost lost in the task. Angelina cherished the weight of him—how she'd missed it.

The common room appeared empty but for the faint, haunting sounds of heavy breathing and moans of haste as the two of them labored against rapidly increasing desire. They undid buttons and pulled down zippers, shrugged off tops and kicked off bottoms doggedly. They kissed and bit down into each other's skin and stared into each other's eyes—both not thinking of much except the other and the desire that kept growing...Harry groaned in frustration as he fumbled with her bra. Once he got the clasp undone he yanked it off, causing her to pant wantonly and bite her lip as he stored it with the rest of their clothing.

Soon they were both naked; their clothes pushed down into the cracks between the cushions they lay on. The soft, silky fabric of the cloak made the hairs on Angelina's skin stand on end as they moved around underneath it.

Harry's body undulated against hers and Angelina reacted by opening her legs so he could settle himself between them. He swallowed, inhaling shakily—for he'd been thinking of being with her like this again almost every day without even realizing it. He was aching for her; his hesitation did not last long, such was the intensity of his need. With a gentle push he entered her; his flesh sinking down into the moist nectar of her sex as his breath escaped his nostrils in a slow, hot stream. Harry crushed his lips against hers and slid his tongue between them, grunting hungrily before he began to move, his belly sliding against hers with the gathering momentum.

Her rhythmic panting made steamy, rising circles in the fabric of the cloak. Unlike their first time, Harry did not seem to need guidance now and Angelina lost her head in the weight of his body, the steady thrust of himself inside her, the sounds he made against her neck...

Harry reached down and hooked his forearm under her leg, bringing her closer to him so that their skin became hot and damp with sweat as he steadily pushed in and out. Angelina arched her back, squeezing her eyes shut, no doubt becoming consumed by the intense sensation of pleasure that soared through her with each deep, throbbing stroke. Harry kept moving, faster and faster, everything in his head gone. She began to quiver inside, her senses filling up steadily.

Angelina's teeth closed round the soft flesh of his shoulder; her head swam as he made love to her with his face buried in her neck and his breath steaming her hair. She let out a long, shuddering whimper when Harry pulled out and then came down again hard—it sent her into a blinding fit of pleasure that shook her head to toe. Once her orgasm hit her; the walls of her womanhood contracting around his member as she became saturated with that warm, silken nectar; Harry felt himself drawing dangerously near his own explosive climax as he pumped now with renewed abandon. His hard, desperate strokes against her already over-stimulated clit racked her with heaving cries that drove him further and deeper and harder until he thought he would explode. A very visceral, burning, aching emotion struck him all over and mingled with the pain and pleasure seizing his body so all Harry could do was give in and let it wash over him.

She was trembling all over when it passed. Harry breathed as if he'd just run miles but she savored the forceful, throaty sounds vibrating against her collarbone and the prickly steam escaping his nostrils on her skin. Slowly the muscles in his back relaxed and he went limp in her arms, still taking deep, guttural breaths. Angelina's open mouth inflated and deflated the delicate fabric of the cloak as she gathered herself again.

After a long while in which both of them closed their eyes and drifted off into stillness that wasn't quite sleep but not quite wakefulness, Harry moved, turning his face away from her neck. Her damp hair

peeled itself from his skin as he shifted, his head taking up extra slack in the cloak so that it inched its way up their ankles a little further.

"It's hot under this thing..." he muttered against her lips. She nodded lethargically. Harry's glasses were missing, but he could still just make out her features in the dark. She looked completely relaxed. He smiled against her mouth and kissed her a few times, feeling a poke of victory for the state of her.

He removed himself from her and they lay side by side under the cloak. Their feet and a few other parts were sticking out—Harry felt the cooler air from the common room in the tips of his hair and on his exposed shoulder. He didn't care. He stared sleepily at the ceiling through the translucent fabric and for a few happy moments he didn't worry about anything.

After a while Angelina turned on her side and rested her head on his shoulder. The cloak was disturbed again and now even more body parts were sticking out oddly. Anyone who came upon them would be quite confused and alarmed.

She watched him for a long time. His eyes had closed and his face was relaxed—he looked like any normal sleeping boy, but for the jagged rise of flesh peeking out from the mess of black hair clinging damply to his forehead. For that scar was a mark of something way beyond the ordinary, even by wizards' standards. All that time Angelina thought she was unconsciously treating him with kid gloves because he was two years her junior. Now she understood it wasn't just because of his age, but much more because of who he is—because of the things she'd heard, the tales they told about what had happened to Harry year after year. Did she honestly think that by hiding what was happening...that by trying to cushion all that awful stuff behind denial...she could somehow keep him out of harm's way? Keep him with her; keep his days ordinary and safe? No...no that was never going to be the case, and now she could finally see.

"Harry?"

Harry heard her whisper his name and he opened his eyes, turning his head to face her. It must have been late; the clock on the wall ticked very quietly, the night sounds outside the windows were running together in a chorus. "Hmm?"

Angelina sighed, studying his eyes. "I wanted to ask you something. You don't have to answer if you don't want."

"Ask me," he said seriously, his voice still sanded with the effects of their love-making.

"...what happens to you? When that magic—that power—comes over you?"

Harry stared at her, her question surprising him somewhat. He hadn't expected her to ask that of him for some reason. Rather he thought she might ask him if what they just did meant he wasn't angry anymore. Harry shook his head, a little lost for proper words to describe the feeling...after all he didn't understand it much more than she did. "I don't feel like myself. Like I'm another version of me...I guess..."

"What do you see? What do you hear? Is it...You-Know-Who? Can you hear him?"

"No," he concentrated on the memory of the sensation. Faintly...as he lay there...he could hear the electric hum in his ears. "There's no sound but one."

"What is it?"

Angelina watched Harry shrug slowly, his eyes narrowed to the ceiling they could see through the Invisibility Cloak. "I don't know what it is. It's like static...not a voice. It's just a feeling."

"What does it feel like?" She pictured his wide, unseeing eyes in the dungeons. The eerie glow of magic surrounding them all as they tried time and again to stop him. "Does it hurt? Like your scar?"

Again, Harry shook his head. “No. I just feel angry. Very, very angry. I can’t help it. It’s all over me, running all through me.”

“And are you sure it’s your own anger?”

“Yes. No—I don’t know. I feels like mine.”

Angelina paused, still watching him. Then Harry tried to fight it, but one after the other recent events became prominent again in his mind, and he could not help reliving them—Dumbledore’s warning: don’t let it control you, Umbridge’s wild eyes accusing him of practicing the Dark Arts, Snape’s intolerance, and Malfoy...

Malfoy and Angelina.

“It is mine...” he muttered.

Becoming suddenly claustrophobic, Harry reached up and pulled himself from under the cover of his Invisibility Cloak. Angelina gasped and curled up underneath to keep herself hidden, but Harry needed air very badly—he climbed over the back of the couch stark naked and breathed in deeply.

“Harry?”

Harry’s heartbeat had sped up and he took a moment to gather himself before turning and reaching down to pull the cloak from her face. A beautiful head seemed to grow out of the crimson velvet. Angelina stared up at him with alarm. He hesitated, but decided that he couldn’t hold it in any longer.

“Now I need to ask you something.”

Angelina’s expression changed and she sat up, still clutching the cloak to her naked body. “Before you start—I think maybe you should put some clothes on...” she said calmly, almost as if she knew already what he would say.

Harry suddenly remembered that he was naked and hastily covered himself with a pillow until Angelina had fetched his boxer shorts from

their hiding place under one of the cushions. He slipped into them and sat down next to her on the couch, running his hands through his hair several times, his cheeks burning.

"Okay...ask it." She hugged herself with his cloak, her body completely invisible below the shoulders.

"And you'll tell me the truth this time?" Angelina nodded; her eyes were wide and her pupils shining just the way they did on that rainy Valentine's Day afternoon in his dorm room. Harry stared at her, unable to stop the anger he'd only mentioned to her seconds before from beginning to develop deep inside him. "What did Malfoy say while you guys were waiting outside Dumbledore's office?"

She blinked at him impassively, but he knew she had heard and perfectly understood the question. It had been in the back of his mind the whole time he was standing there listening to Fudge try to get him to confess—the whole time Umbridge questioned him, Harry was thinking they're out there alone, out there with no one watching them and Angelina with no wand...

When she came in looking agitated he knew for certain. For all the chaos that ensued, Harry never lost that thought. And now that they were sitting here alone, he simply wanted to know the truth.

"He bragged about Marietta..." Her answer was matter-of-fact, but he could tell there was more. After a pause in which he did not breathe, though he was scarcely aware of it, she continued: "...and he kissed me again." Harry's expression grew dark and he grimaced. Angelina felt a faint fluttering against her face. It was warm and it disturbed a few strands of the limp hair that fell against her cheek. She knew what it was...

"You let him kiss you again?" He sounded like he was in physical pain, but behind that there lay something she was beginning to recognize in him more and more often lately...anger. Angelina could feel it vibrating off him like an invisible electric current growing stronger with each wave.

She had known that when they got into this it would be hard—especially because she was afraid of his reaction. But she also knew, from the moment McGonagall told them she didn't always agree with Dumbledore where Harry was concerned, that she should tell him everything she and the headmaster discussed that night. She owed it to him. This part, though, would have to come first. Fear was something she couldn't deal with anymore—not when it concerned Harry. She refused to be afraid of him. He was only just discovering this...whatever it was...but if she knew anything about him at all from their time together, she knew that he would never hurt her. They would fight, but she would be damned if she let things end up like they did before. She would not hurt him again either. The old stubborn Angelina kicked in just then.

Angelina sat up straight and shook her head before explaining: "It wasn't that simple Harry. He had my wand, and he got the upper hand before I could get it back--"

Harry stood up abruptly and swept past her, walking briskly around the couch with his fists clenching in and out and his jaw line hard-set with irritation. She had expected this reaction. He shook his head at her. "Angelina—what...? What am I supposed to do now?"

"You're angry."

"Yes!" he snapped; his voice sounded so helpless—this was the first time that night where he seemed to act his age. He looked frustrated but confused. Angelina felt terrible. The warm flutter was a breeze now, blowing her hair away from her face before drawing back. He closed his eyes and tried to calm himself, remember himself. "Do you want me to lose control? Are you trying to get me to...?"

"No. I want to be honest with you. I haven't been...I hid a lot of my feelings from you. And I hated it."

"You're not making any sense," said Harry desperately, "if you hated it so much—if you just couldn't stand hiding the truth from me, then why did you do it?"

"I don't know..." she answered honestly. "I thought I was protecting you."

"Are you fucking kidding me, Angelina?" Harry was pacing; those stunning emerald orbs of his turning her way every now and again; blazing with anger. "Jesus I'm not some child! I'm your little brother; I'm your fucking boyfriend. You don't need to protect me—I wanted to protect you!"

Damn it, Angelina, you idiot...of course he was right. Angelina stood up, still wrapped in the cloak—an odd sight of a girl with no physical body between her shoulders and her feet. She walked around the couch towards him. "What do you want me to do? What can I say? I'm an idiot, all right? I made a mistake—and you know how stubborn I am!"

A grunt of annoyance from him, and he rolled his eyes. "You and Hermione all day long..."

"What's Hermione got to do with this?"

"I mean it's all the same thing. Malfoy, Occlumency, my temper—it's all just people trying to control me, people trying to tell me that what I feel, and the things I want to do are no good." Subtle...very subtle, the changes. And perhaps Angelina hadn't noticed them before because she was either upset or so caught up in everything that was going on that she didn't recognize right away...but she could see now in the dark, in the quiet...

Harry's eyes did not look his own. They looked older; burning...the warm breeze fluttered and drew back, fluttered and drew back. His voice lowered, grew deep and was sanded with...something. He was talking like himself, but Angelina saw him differently. "There is something happening to me—something...something amazing! What I can do...how long has it been like this and I didn't know it?"

"Harry--"

"How long?" he stopped pacing and faced her. "And I didn't know it or couldn't feel it because everyone wanted to protect me from myself."

“You can’t control it.”

“If I learn more about it—if I try hard enough I know I can—!”

“And what about your Occlumency?”

Harry shook his head. “I-I don’t know… I can’t do it. I never could. Not with Snape…”

“Well what if someone else taught you?”

“Like who?”

“Anyone…”

“Who else is there? Professor Dumbledore is gone! He left me—he left me and I didn’t ask him to do that! I would be much happier with Sirius than stuck here with him gone and no one but Snape to—!” Harry reached up suddenly and rubbed his scar, his face folding in the dim light with pain. Angelina rushed towards him, alarmed. “No—I’m fine.” He pulled away slightly from her touch; she had reached up to press her hand to his forehead.

“You’re getting upset.”

“No, I’m okay. It’s just…something is happening I think. He’s feeling…anxious.” He took a couple of steps away from her as she lowered her hand again. They stood facing each other near the two sets of stairs that twisted upward in separate directions.

The pain in his scar stung badly for a few seconds but began to recede. He felt the foreign itch of anxiety leaving him and he knew that Voldemort’s connection was easing off. It had only lasted a second, but it was just as ominous as that glimpse of crazed happiness he felt after his first Occlumency lesson.

He was on the point of speaking again when they heard a noise from above them. Harry grabbed Angelina and together they toppled over the back of the couch, scrambling to cover themselves with the cloak.

They froze in a tangle when they heard the unmistakable sound of sleepy footsteps on the stairs.

“What are you doing up?” Hermione’s groggy voice. Harry could see the top of her bushy head peeking at him over the back of the couch. And, across from it, there was Ron’s copper top.

“Thought I heard voices down here...”

“Me too...” There was a skeptical pause. Angelina held her breath, praying to god they wouldn’t be caught naked on this couch by Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley. Harry saw Hermione step down...it seemed she was looking right at him. Another one of those looks of dawning came across her face and she backed up, retracing her steps.

“Um...I don’t see anyone, so...”

“Hey...did you see something move?” Ron was squinting at them now. Harry held his breath. “Is that..?”

Also, Ron’s face relaxed in understanding and he let out a low whistle. Hermione giggled. Harry rolled his eyes; a Charlie horse was developing in his calf. His two friends scuttled back up the stairs and out of sight. As quickly as it had come, the anger that had emerged before the disruption began to ease off. He let his legs relax and she untangled herself from him, starting to get up but he didn’t move to allow her to.

“Just tell me one thing...” he whispered hoarsely, his face so close to hers that their skin touched in tiny places.

“What do you want to know?” she seemed earnestly devoted to telling him the truth and nothing but. He felt her hands gripping his back; his arms were braced against the sinking cushion.

“Did you like him back? At any time—did you, do you?”

“No.” She said this without hesitation and he believed her. She leaned into him, hugged him tight. Harry closed his eyes and tried to

let this reconcile the turmoil...but more questions appeared where that one had been. He lay there with her for a long time again. They fell asleep, but it was restless. Soon they both agreed they should go up to bed. There was no telling how late it was—neither of them bothered to look at the clock.

As Angelina slipped on her clothes, she found a way to verbalize what she wanted when she couldn't before.

"Harry...?"

He looked exhausted. Worried. And still a little angry. "What?"

She leaned into him, her face close to his, and whispered earnestly, "I love you."

"You do?" his voice cracked, she actually felt the muscles in his chest constrict under her hand that rested there. She knew he was trying hard not to become emotional. She remembered that night in his bed, with the moonlight illuminating his tears...

"Yes..." she whispered. Oh she was young, and he was even younger. There were many people who would say that they were merely teenagers flirting with their idea of what love is—some would say what they had was merely an example of teenage lust and teenage emotions running wild. There was life and death at stake—there was real danger. Those who'd long ago lost their grasp of innocence or genuine affection would only see the urgent coming together of a lonely boy and girl; everything was changing so rapidly that it was hard to tell where things would end up from one moment to the next. Of course these kids would cling to each other with chaos looming ahead of them at any turn...but Angelina always knew whenever she said this—the moment she said it—that she meant it. It was real; as real as anything.

"But, what about all this? What about what I did—what's happening to me? Aren't you afraid of m--?"

"Shh...I'm not afraid of you Harry." There was so much they needed to talk about; to do. But as she kissed him gently about the face, she

saw him close his eyes and his shoulders relaxed and he looked so tired that she couldn't bear getting into all of that now. Enough was enough for tonight. If she knew there was a chance they could be together again, she could be patient. She could wait until tomorrow. "You should sleep now..." she let her hands fall from him and stood up reluctantly. He stood as well.

As she was walking around to leave him, resolved to spend the rest of the night alone with her thoughts and her hope and her disquiet, she felt him behind her and then his arms were closing round her waist. "Stay with me."

She almost breathed a sigh of relief.

"Okay..."

So Harry picked up his cloak, knowing full well this conversation wasn't over; knowing, as she did, that there was much more ahead of them—that there were things approaching with the dawn that they'd have to deal with, but together. He allowed her to lead him up to his dorm. Four snoring boys greeted them in the dark room, but the two of them walked through silently. They dragged their bodies into Harry's bed, Hedwig's glowing eyes following them vigilantly every step of the way.

Chapter Thirty-Four: Obduro Fermentum

“Obduro Fermentum”

“Endurance Strengthener”—this is potion designed to give the drinker a significant boost in strength, but also in endurance. Unlike its elder brother, Strengthening Solution, it acts as both a potion and a spell and does not have an affect unless the incantation to seal the spell is delivered at the end of the brew. The potion acts as an enhancer for the drinker’s physical strength, while the spell has an affect on the drinker mentally...

“....At the time of its conception, by a reclusive ex-Auror Milo Bodden eighty-seven years ago (the exact date is unknown, because Bodden did not keep notes), the spell was meant to be taken by Aurors should they ever be captured by an enemy. Torture was sometimes expected, and Bodden claimed his Fermentum potion would strengthen both the body and the mind, and give the drinker an unwavering sense of power and a steadfast resolve.

“ ‘This potion should be taken by all young Aurors at the start of their training, and taken at the prescribed dose on a regular basis for all their years as Lawmen for the Ministry of Magic,’ Bodden declared via-delivered letter upon completion of the now banned potion. ‘My Fermentum will protect them from the cruel ways of our enemies, and rest assured any and all acts of merciless torture, Cruciatus or otherwise, will be endured as easily as a quick game of Quidditch!’

“...Bodden was known in the small village he retreated to in southern Scotland as a ‘madman’ who kept to himself with no friends or family to speak of....

“The potion, having not officially been recognized by the Ministry, became a Black Market item, and in a few short years was notorious for causing madness. It was found that the incantation made the potion highly addictive, and poisoning soon became a concern. Side-effects reported by St. Mungo’s include irrational aggressiveness, total disregard for reason, confusion of identity, eventual deterioration of moral behavior, etc. ‘People become total beasts!’ one Healer,

Mildred Wiggum testified at Bodden's trial. 'They become all craving, passion, vigor! They have no regard for any decent perspective and if they want something, they must have it whatever the consequences!' "

"It is illegal to brew Obduro Fermentum in any amount, and punishment for this or possession of the Black Market item is five years in Azkaban Prison..."

-M.O.M. LOGG OF ILLEGAL, BLACK MARKET, AND POISONOUS POTIONS

-Page 892, Section II, Index # 37A

-Records, Ministry of Magic
Severus Snape stood in his office thinking.

It was fortunate that Albus Dumbledore lent him the use of the pensieve—right now the professor's mind was teeming with recent memories that troubled him more than the prospect of another evening spent sparring with Potter.

The first memory he would deposit tonight before the fifth year's arrival for their lesson was not the most recent one, but it was the one he'd been going over most since Dumbledore left. It came before the discovery of Potter's little club, before Fawkes delivered Dumbledore's letter, and before Lucius' confession. It came before Severus looked into Draco's eyes and saw what his father had done to him--and, in turn, what the boy himself had been doing--hidden in his young mind.

It was the night Dumbledore returned to the castle from his trip to Azkaban Prison.

"This desk..." Professor Snape indicated the desk sitting between himself and the headmaster. Dumbledore frowned, his eyes sweeping across the desk slowly. Severus now crossed his arms and nodded at the shelves surrounding them, filled with glass jars of various specimens and herbs and pickled things. "And several of those, as well. Once he realized what he was doing, they dropped."

"And he couldn't hear you?" Dumbledore spoke after a moment.

"No, in fact it seemed he was totally unaware of his surroundings."

"I see..."

Dumbledore turned now and his eyes began, like with the desk, to sweep across the room. He looked from shelf to shelf individually as he turned full circle, slowly, until he came to face Snape again. Dumbledore sighed. He seemed to be doing that a lot lately. He had returned from his journey to Azkaban prison where he found, as he'd expected, that the Dementors had indeed abandoned their truce with the Ministry. Some of them remained, patrolling the dank halls of the prison for the most woeful inmates, but when Dumbledore approached they abandoned those as well. He caught one and was able to speak to It. It told him that there was little he could do—Voldemort offered their kind a much sweeter reward for their services than the Minister's same petty criminals. And then It told him that It was looking forward to sucking the life out of him. Dumbledore destroyed It.

Tonight he came back to Hogwarts to find that Umbridge was trying to toss out Sybil Trelawney, the Centaurs in the forest were now revolting against him for asking Firenze for his help—and Harry Potter had almost crushed Severus Snape with a his own desk.

"Severus..." Dumbledore spoke now, landing his crystal blue gaze on the Potions Master. "...what happened to drive Harry into such a state?"

Snape paused, his dark eyes narrowing. "We argued, headmaster," was his honest reply. Upon the forbidding look Dumbledore issued him, he added: "He was being insolent, as usual, and I merely reminded him of his place."

"His 'place'?"

Dumbledore understood that what happened was very significant, that Snape could've been seriously injured, and that what Harry had done—well there were nothing but ominous implications. He understood Severus' position...but what of Harry's?

"Severus, we have gone through this before." Rarely could one find the tone of impatience in Dumbledore's usually benign voice, but Severus Snape was not just anyone—he and Dumbledore knew a relationship more complicated than that of professor and headmaster. Dumbledore only became stern with his former student when the situation called for it, and now was not the time to be affable. "I instructed you—when we first agreed that you would tutor Harry in Occlumency—not to lose your temper."

"I realize that, but--" Severus tried quietly, without much expectation of being heard.

"We agreed, Severus, that just as Harry's only objective would be to master Occlumency, yours would be to exercise patience and care."

Dumbledore paused, his gaze steady and unyielding. Severus knew full well what was expected of him, and though he resented it fiercely, he found himself feeling the tiniest burn of guilt as the older wizard's gaze penetrated him. Could he not defend himself? Could he not simply explain—and be heard—that the Potter brat had called him names, insulted him, basically tossed all inkling of respect and humility to the wind? Harry was Dumbledore's own little glass boy that he was extremely careful with; that he smothered with watchfulness and worry and pride...too much so, Severus often thought.

This reminded him of another boy that the headmaster treated almost the same way. Perhaps Severus' impatience with Potter this year stemmed somewhat from that memory and the absence now of the feeling Dumbledore's attention gave him as a young man?

But the matter at hand—Harry Potter was changing. There was a power growing within him that had, even from the small glimpse Snape was given that evening, an awesome yet terrible face. Snape's mistake had been that rather than easing the practice of Occlumency

into Potter's grasp--rather than being patient and acting with care as Dumbledore had instructed--he basically thrust it at him. He pushed Potter, and kept pushing him. Snape thought bitterly that this task was given to him more as a punishment for his past aggressions towards the young wizard than anything else...or a test.

"Sir, you did not tell me that Potter carried such power within him." Snape uttered, trying not to let his resentment show through his voice or on his face. "You did not tell me that in addition to protecting him from the Dark Lord's penetration, I would be teaching him Occlumency to suppress this rather..." the Potions Master paused, and Dumbledore seemed to steel himself against his next words, "...dark...magical force."

"You think it dark, do you?" Dumbledore asked first, though Snape was sure the response to his indirect accusation of deception was coming.

"Destructive," he spoke calmly. "He was certainly determined to do me harm."

"Perhaps, Severus, he wouldn't have been so determined if you had not baited him into such a detestable course of action?" Dumbledore's gaze was innocuous, but Snape knew better than to trust that. "Perhaps I would not have needed to tell you what I feared if you had done as I asked you?"

"And Potter—has he done what you asked of him?" demanded Snape. His temper—his brewing resentment of the whole situation—was beginning to get the better of him. He leaned forward over the desk, much as he had done to Harry mere hours before. "Has he ever given you the courtesy of trusting your judgment, of obeying your wishes because he should know you would never lead him to harm? No! He has dragged his feet the entirety of our months' work, and for what? To spite you; to show you he is no puppet and to give me as hard a time as possible!"

Dumbledore merely listened. This was not the first time Severus had raised his voice at him, though if the older wizard remembered correctly, the last time had been quite a while ago.

"Would you see this? Headmaster, would you ever let the truth of the situation penetrate your veritable fortress of faith in that impudent, reckless, thick-headed child--!"

"That is enough, Severus." Dumbledore interrupted him softly. "Please, do not call Harry names." Snape clamped his mouth shut and breathed the hot air of his rising temper out through his nostrils. Of course, Dumbledore would reprimand him for calling precious Harry names rather than for speaking to him so harshly. He stood up straight again and waited. Again, and for what seemed like the thousandth time though it would certainly not be the last, Dumbledore sighed. "You are right—I was wrong to withhold my fears from you." He shook his head grimly. "But now you have seen what Harry is capable of, should this power within him be bred in the wrong fashion. Anger, resentment, bitterness, and hatred will turn it into something monstrous that cannot be controlled."

"How long have you suspected he had such power?"

"Far longer than I'd care to admit, my friend," was the headmaster's somewhat apologetic reply. "Since the beginning, I'm afraid."

There was a long break of silence, and Snape let his anger leave him. There was certainly nothing to be gained from being angry with Dumbledore for something he could not change. He instead opted to change the subject.

"Potter has seen Rookwood."

"Augustus Rookwood?"

"Yes. He has dreamt of a room, where Rookwood and the Dark Lord convened...headmaster, they were discussing the prophecy."

"Rookwood no doubt told him how to remove it..."

"No doubt."

Dumbledore frowned deeply. "Did Harry understand what was said?"

"To an extent..."

"He is still having those dreams...this is not good, Severus." Dumbledore shook his head, his eyes unfocused, and spoke as though he were debating with himself. "If he gets too close—if Voldemort realizes what's happening to Harry—he will surely try to lure him...to kill him. Harry isn't ready..."

"Forgive me--will he ever be ready?" Dumbledore did not answer. "Headmaster, it seems to me..." Snape walked around the desk, having calmed down, and crossed his arms thoughtfully. Dumbledore was glad to see that they were on the same page again. "...it seems that no matter what form this power of his takes, dark or otherwise, Potter would not be capable of controlling the way he is now...he is impatient, temperamental, and quite frankly too young to understand what he's dealing with."

"Well, let us pray it isn't dark, Severus...though you are quite right. That is why it is crucial for him to master Occlumency. It is, I'm afraid, my only hope of shielding him from Voldemort's grasp. He is laying a trap for Harry—we must, we must help him to shut Voldemort out."

Again, Dumbledore paused, and then spoke up again anxiously.

"Have you seen...anything...during your lessons with him that explains the source of some of his aggressive behavior?"

Snape sighed. "He has given a great deal of effort to keeping it from me, but I have seen glimpses of several encounters he's had with Draco Malfoy."

"Draco Malfoy?" Dumbledore frowned.

"Yes, sir. I do not think Potter is aware, but I've seen more deeply into his memories than he would like. He has even attempted to duel with Draco." Secretly, Snape felt bitter satisfaction in passing this knowledge on to Dumbledore. Your precious Potter is a troublemaker, and I have seen with my own eyes what arrogance and stupidity breed... he thought, though he spoke: "The signs of fighting we saw

on the Quidditch pitch some months ago...I've seen evidence, though he struggles mightily to keep it from me, that he was responsible for them." He watched Dumbledore's reaction carefully.

"...and Draco?"

Severus bristled, but nodded. "Regrettably, Draco was involved, but it was Potter that challenged him."

"You know this because...?"

Severus realized his mistake too late. Whilst trying to shed some sort of revealing light on what he believed was a nasty trouble-making instinct Potter had, he had inadvertently given away Draco's involvement, and the fact that he'd covered for the boy. He admitted as much now. "Draco...confided in me...sir."

"Yet you did not turn him over to Professor Umbridge." This was not a question. Severus despised the faint smile playing at Dumbledore's lips. He wanted to tell the old coot that he had no problem turning Potter over, but to do so would have brought more trouble down on Draco from his father. He couldn't do that, and it seemed that Dumbledore knew this already. "I suspect you would've done, but I dare say that you and I share the same protective instinct for certain students in this school, Severus."

"I am protective of Draco for good reason, Headmaster..."

"Yes..." Dumbledore leaned against the desk, next to Snape, his weathered hand examining the surface. He squinted down at it, seeing traces of Harry's magic still left in the grains of wood. "...yes, I thought we might come to that subject before our interview was over."

"You are aware, then, that Draco has been put through quite an ordeal by his father?"

"I saw the signs on him...he looks dreadful..." there was real sympathy—and some anger—in the old wizard's voice that did Snape's heart good to hear. "Though I didn't want to believe his own father was capable of such a thing."

"I've made him remedies for the pain, and to treat the long term effects, but much damage has been caused."

"Senseless..."

"I fear that in his own obtuse way, Lucius is attempting to prepare Draco for an inevitable future at the hands of the Dark Lord."

"Oh, let us not call it 'inevitable'. Those we can save, we must, and it is not too late for him."

Snape nodded, relieved. "I do not think it's too late, either."

"But that is not what you should be focusing on at this point in time, Severus."

Snape turned his head sharply to glare at the headmaster. "I don't understand how you can say such a thing, sir."

"Our first priority is for Harry to--"

--master Occlumency, yes, yes I know!" Despite himself, Severus tossed his hand dismissively and turned away from Dumbledore's aggravating determination to hold Harry Potter's well-being above everyone else's.

"I must tell you, I grow tired of your impatience with me, my friend..." The younger wizard draped in black did not turn around, but held his head low, listening. "...and, for that matter, with Harry." Standing upright again, Dumbledore walked around to face Snape, placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"You cannot ask me not to look after Draco. He needs help just as much—if not more—as Potter."

"No, I cannot ask you not to look after him. And I will not. What I am asking you to do is bear with me. Allow me to see to Draco, and trust—yes, Severus trust—that if you only finish what you've started with Harry everything will turn out well."

"Forgive me, sir, but Potter is completely opposed to Occlumency! To me, and to your wish to have me teach it to him! He has refused to learn a single thing since we began it. Why must I do this? I never thought I'd find myself agreeing with the boy, but perhaps he is right to question why it's me and not you. Won't you let me see to Draco instead?"

This was as close to pleading as Snape had ever or would ever come. And, in turn, Dumbledore's gaze was as severe as the Potions Master had ever seen it.

"No, Severus. No..." He paused, his expression still uncompromising, before continuing very quietly. "It must be this way and no other. Especially now more than ever—and you know why. Do not ask me that again."

Snape remained silent.

Dumbledore turned to leave the office. As he reached the threshold, he turned back, and when he did the candlelight caught him fully. He looked very tired, and very ill at ease. Snape did not like realizing that he was adding to the old wizard's pains rather than helping.

"Surely you can see the good in Harry?" Dumbledore asked wearily. "Surely you have glimpsed--during your many sessions with him, alone, in this room--something other than effrontery and stubbornness?"

Snape paused. "I did notice..." he began, and Dumbledore was smiling before the words escaped him, "Potter seems to have got himself involved in...romantic...pursuits." Snape rolled his eyes when the headmaster's smile grew wider.

"He's in love, is he?"

"Quite so." The Potions Master found himself looking down at his shoes, arms still crossed. He admitted, rather begrudgingly: "Angelina Johnson is a gifted girl, though in my opinion, just as irreverent as he is." He would've added that he grew tired of the unwanted glimpses

into Potter's very personal dealings with the girl (that incident on the common room sofa sprang to mind, and what happened in the boys' showers, for Merlin's sake!) but decided to spare Dumbledore the details.

"Good...that is very good. It will help. Thank you, Severus."

The headmaster was gone again before Snape looked up in surprise. Severus pulled the fragile trail of memory from his temple and placed it carefully into the Pensieve.

He watched it swirl around for a moment, his eyes unfocused. The glittering light of thoughts and dreams danced across his dark face as he drifted off into another memory that brought a chill to him. It was not long after he left Minerva McGonagall with Potter and the Angelina girl that he received it—the letter.

When he broke up the small stand off on the eighth floor, Severus went all the way back down to the dungeons and sat in his office to wait. He knew that Dumbledore would contact him before the night was over, no matter what the circumstance.

And as he expected, shortly after midnight Fawkes' calling card appeared over his head, illuminating the small dungeon office for a split second in the light of the red flame. A single phoenix feather with a small scroll of parchment attached to it floated silently down over the desk and landed at Snape's fingertips.

He reached out for it immediately and opened it. The familiar, slanted handwriting of Albus Dumbledore swept across the parchment and as Severus read he began slowly to stand from his sitting position. His eyes went from one word to the next rapidly as he rose; his mind connecting the dots. When he was done, the Potions Master was sweeping around the desk headed for the door across the room. He could not hesitate; the message in the letter was quite clear. Anger rose in him as he made his way swiftly through the halls of the dungeons, and the words in Dumbledore's letter echoed in his mind:

Severus,

Circumstance being what it is, I have had to leave you, and the matter of Draco is therefore yours to handle.

Tonight, when I requested that you bring the Pensieve to my office, I did not tell you what I needed it for. The situation is very delicate, and it involves the young lady I was with, Angelina Johnson. It also involves Draco, Severus.

I viewed a memory tonight—a memory thought to be Obliviated; erased forever. It was fortunate the caster of the spell is a novice, and at the time was not in a very rational frame of mind. I am speaking of Draco. He cast the spell on Angelina, and he did it to conceal a very grave offense on his part.

I saw, on Hogwarts grounds, along a path that students should feel nothing but safe walking, a horrible encounter between the two of them. I haven't much time to explain everything, but I will tell you this: Draco did something unspeakable, and if Angelina had not been determined to escape from him, he would have done her even greater harm. He is to be punished severely. But do not think that is all there is to this story—Draco was not acting as his self. He has been...influenced. This is not the work of an Unforgivable curse but of another, less obvious source. One I believe you are familiar with.

You are a Master of Potions, Severus.

I wonder if you would be able to single out the symptoms of one who has been poisoned with Fermentum?

I must end this letter—I have only been a fugitive for a few hours, but I find that where time is concerned there is little difference to being Headmaster—I still don't have much of it to spare, my friend.

Please see to this matter as quickly—yet quietly—as you can.

I trust you Severus.

--Albus Dumbledore.

P.S. I fear now, more than ever, Harry's Occlumency lessons are crucial. You must overcome your resentment of him my friend, and you must seek his trust without bitterness. Can you do that for me? Please forgive him his shortcomings and do your best to help him master this technique. And forgive me mine...I wish I could have done things another way, but as you well know, in these dark times nothing is certain until it is past.

Severus headed straight for the last hall before the turnoff that lead down to the kitchens.

He turned a corner and moved through the dimly lit space towards the entrance of the Slytherin common room, where the suit of armor stood guard. "Dispholidus typus," he uttered and the suit of armor bowed stiffly before stepping out of the way. Snape passed it without a second glance, his purpose a single sharp point in the center of his thoughts that lead him forward. Through the sitting area cluttered with green velvet couches and armchairs, past the studying tables, and down the corridor that lead to the boys' dormitories. The starry night sky illuminated his white face in broken shards as he passed the windows, his black robes billowing forebodingly with his movement.

He reached the room he was looking for, and pressed his fingertips to the cool mahogany surface of the door so that it opened with hardly a sound.

Inside, four boys were sleeping.

Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott snored in various octaves but they were of little concern to Snape in this moment. His eyes surveyed the room shrewdly until they landed on the lone sleeping form he sought out—that of Draco's.

He strode across the room and reached out to touch the slumbering young wizard. He only had to shake him once and Draco's eyes slid open as easily as if he had been waiting for his Potions professor to arrive. Snape knelt at Draco's bedside, his anger coursing through him almost to the boiling point. Their eyes met.

"Professor?" Draco whispered, squinting.

“Get out of bed, Draco. Now.”

There was only a trace of resistance in the boy’s shining eyes before he slowly did as he was told. Snape fought to control his anger as he stood up and stepped back for Draco, who climbed out of bed and faced his professor groggily. The older wizard turned and plucked a Slytherin robe from a nearby armchair and thrust it in Draco’s hands.

“Put this on and follow me.”

“What is this about, Prof--?”

“Do not speak.” Snape was already moving through the room again. Draco draped himself in the robe and clenched his jaw as he walked behind. He had to quicken his pace to keep up with the professor, who moved as if determined not to look back. Once they had gone back through the common room and emerged out into the hall again, Snape kept going past the suit of armor and up the hall. They walked like this all the way through the dungeons, past Snape’s office, and out into the grand entrance hall. Draco said nothing, only followed silently as he was led through the hall and out onto the grounds.

It was only when Snape turned and began heading the direction of a familiar path that he began to understand what was happening.

He stopped walking abruptly, his heart about to rip itself from his chest with the strength of his unease.

Professor Snape sensed Draco’s discomfort even with his back to the young Slytherin, and he turned on the spot to face him, his features struggling with the anger he felt.

“Know why we’re here, do you?” he snarled. It was as if some amazing switch had occurred—as if for the moment, for tonight, the infuriating Potter had been replaced by Draco. Snape knew that Draco was a product of his family. He had always done his best to guide the child without interfering too much, but tonight all that effort had vanished and he was faced with the bald truth.

Draco swallowed. "No..."

"Do not lie to me, Draco."

They were standing on the edge of the path that Dumbledore spoke of in the letter. Snape could see in Draco's face that this was a place of significance. He stepped closer, his eyes fixed on those pale blue orbs, and silently did a thing he had hoped never to have to do with his young charge. Draco's mind opened up to him like a book, and without difficulty Snape soon found what he was looking for. There was extreme confusion, bitterness, a sense of loss and irrational anger inside. He saw Angelina, felt the unusual curiosity and need to watch her and the even more unusual sense of exhilaration in...

Draco began to resist him, but Snape persisted and the boy had no choice but to allow him to see what he had been keeping in the back of his mind for months. Angelina Johnson filled a good portion of memories and dreams that were disturbing to say the least. And in the center of all this was the path they stood on, a tree, a struggling young girl, and a hastily thrown Memory Charm.

Snape broke the Legilimens and Draco immediately lowered his head to his hands, his chest rising and falling shakily.

"What did you just--?" He groaned and shook his head as if to clear it, looking up at the Potions Master with confused and frightened eyes. "Did you see...?"

Snape chose to quell his rising temper and nodded silently. Draco saw the incredible anger and disappointment in Snape's face, and he began to panic. Remorse filled him from head to foot and he felt his eyes burning in the cool night air.

"Please, Uncle Severus, you don't understand!" he almost begged, his chest hot and stinging, his veins on fire with almost overwhelming emotion. "You have to listen to me, I didn't mean to hurt her, I--!"

"Do you realize what you have done?" The sheer iciness of the dark wizard's voice silenced Draco, and the boy stood a pitiful mess, his eyes welling with childish tears. He nodded miserably. "Do you

realize that it was Dumbledore who told me what you did to that girl? Dumbledore!” Snape turned on his heel and began walking; searching out the tree he’d seen moments ago in Draco’s mind. “And what’s worse—I have no way of protecting you if she’s told anyone else. You could be expelled, Draco! And do you realize what happens if you are forced to leave this school?”

“Yes, sir...” Draco wiped his face, angry with himself for becoming so unglued, and followed. “But I tried to—Uncle, I tried to get rid of--”

Snape held a hand up for silence as he surveyed the scene he’d glimpsed in Draco’s mind. His eyes traveled along the ground, over the trees, and around and around again. He saw each progression as clear as day—from Draco’s attack on the Johnson girl to the moment the spell was cast. He closed his eyes briefly, praying for patience, and turned to face his young pupil again.

“Now you will take me through it.”

“What?”

“Beginning with what idiotic fancy brought you to the situation in the first place.”

“But--!”

“And you will tell me everything, do you understand? Leave out no details—you tell me what you did and you tell me the truth!”

Draco shook his head, his tears from a moment ago now forgotten and his own anger surfacing. He shook his head again and again, his jaw clenched shut. “No. No, I won’t--!”

Swiftly, Snape pulled his wand from his robes and made a sharp, sweeping motion with his wrist. Draco felt an invisible hand strike him across the face and the Potions Master bellowed “SPEAK!”

Draco closed his eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath. Snape could actually see the boy’s heart pounding through the fabric of the robe. When their eyes met again, Draco’s expression was that of

extreme angst. “I...” he began, a breeze catching his white-blond hair so that it strayed into his face. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me...” Severus extracted that memory as carefully as the one before it and placed it into the pensieve.

“I don’t think about the consequences...” he said, his eyes wet and his fists in knots at his sides. “I don’t ever think about what will happen. And now I can’t stop it.”

How could he not have seen it? How could he not have realized what was happening? Was he so distracted by his anger with Draco’s father, his anger at Dumbledore, and his resentment of Potter that he didn’t recognize what was so obvious? He did wonder how the boy was able to endure such torture at such a young age. He was furious with Lucius for what he’d done, and this was the last straw.

“You will not sleep until I give you permission.” Draco attempted to protest, but Severus cut him off. “You will not mettle about with your friends, you will not talk to Delores Umbridge. You will do as I say, when I say it, is that clear?”

“Yes sir...”

“I am tempted to pull you from the Quidditch team...”

“You can’t!”

“I will if I see you so much as look in Angelina Johnson’s direction again, Draco!”

Along with this, along with the other things he did not wish for Harry Potter to see should he finally gain some competency in Occlumency, was what happened after he ushered the confused and tortured Malfoy child to bed.

Death Eaters had already been summoned to the Malfoy estate. They met in Lucius’ secret dungeon below grounds. Severus Apparated from Hogsmeade and approached the gates of the Malfoy home with fury coursing through his veins so ferociously he had to pause and

gather himself for a few moments before entering. This feeling reminded him, bitterly enough, of Potter.

Narcissa answered the door. She looked at him and in an instant he knew that she had been in turmoil for a long time. He hadn't seen her in months. "Severus? Why are you here so late?"

"Where is Lucius, Narcissa? I must speak with him, now."

Her lip quivered slightly and she took a deep breath. Stepping aside for him, Narcissa bowed her head as he passed. "They're talking down there," she spoke, referring to the secret rooms below their feet. "I asked him why you weren't called, but--"

Severus held up a hand. "It's all right. I don't need to be summoned to every tea party in the dungeon, Narcissa. I do, however, have question for your husband regarding your son."

She actually let forth a diminutive whimper then. Closing her eyes to hide the tears from him, Narcissa shook her head. "I knew you'd find out. I've wanted to tell you—to come to you so many times, but Lucius..."

"Severus?" Lucius had appeared in a doorway behind Narcissa, dressed in his Death Eater's robes and draped in shadow. His piercing blue eyes moved from Severus to his wife as he stepped into the foyer; into the light. "What brings you?"

"A matter of the utmost importance," Severus noticed that Narcissa did not dare turn to face her husband. Instead her gaze remained fixed on her hands and she said nothing more as Lucius circled her to stand face-to-face with him. "I'm here about Draco, Lucius."

"Draco?" Lucius made an exasperated sound. "What has he done now?"

"You should tell the others to leave, first. It's very delicate, to say the least."

"The others?" The elder Malfoy raised an eyebrow and turned slightly to regard his wife before lifting the corners of his mouth into a tight smile. "Ah, I see you've been told about our gathering—well, Severus in that case I must ask you to join us."

Lucius' smile remained as he stepped back and nodded toward the doorway he'd appeared in moments before. Severus surveyed him impatiently. "I don't have time now--"

"No, I think tonight you'll make time, old friend." The smile remained, but the eyes flashed dangerously. "Because, you see, I find myself wondering why it is that you've shown up here with so-called 'urgent' news about my misbehaving son--"

"Lucius, please..." Narcissa spoke but Lucius held up a hand of warning that caused her to quiet down again, his dangerous gaze still fixed upon Severus.

--when mere hours before I received word that Dumbledore has been ousted from Hogwarts and is now a fugitive from the Ministry." His cold smile turned into a nasty smirk. "That was very important information, don't you think, Severus?"

"Very. And you did hear of it."

"Yes...but not from you."

It was Severus' turn to smirk. Coolly, he met Lucius' stone gaze head on and uttered quietly, "What makes you think that information didn't come from me?"

Lucius thought about it for a moment before speaking again. "You sent Umbridge to tell me about Dumbledore?" he asked skeptically.

Severus did not miss a beat.

"Not directly. But I did know that going to you myself would prove foolish. I had to wait. I've been sent here by Dumbledore to find out about Draco, and so I came under his orders." He held up the letter

that Dumbledore had written. “I figured she would want to tell you as soon as possible. I let her.”

“You ‘let her’?” Lucius laughed aloud. “How can someone so obsessed with power be so weak?”

“Perhaps that is why she is so obsessed with power.”

Lucius laughed again and strode towards the doorway. He didn’t say a word to Narcissa as he passed. She followed him with blazing eyes, but then Lucius disappeared through the dark threshold and called back to Severus: “Come down! Everyone is waiting.”

Severus knew better than to trust that the Master Malfoy had fully accepted his explanation, and even as he followed the other man down into the darkness he kept up his guard.

‘Everyone’ turned out to be Rookwood, Antonin Dolohov, MacNair, and Bellatrix Lestrange looking every bit as insane as ever.

In fact, as Lucius led Snape down a winding stair into his enormous cellar her wild, harsh voice could be heard proclaiming insanities vigorously. And it was his, Severus’, name that escaped her lips several times before they reached the dimly lit room where everyone was convened.

“The Dark Lord will not be pleased with him if ever he shows his crooked nose again!” she was growling, much to Snape’s amusement. “The old fool has been ousted from that preposterous school and not a word from his little pet. Do you see, now Dolohov?” her voice took on that familiar, manic air as they neared the threshold.

Dolohov grunted. In the dark, Lucius turned slightly to peer at Snape’s reaction over his shoulder as they advanced.

“Do you see? Severus Snape is a filthy traitor, and--!”

“If you have something you wish to say to me, Bellatrix...” Snape emerged before Lucius, into the light, his pallid face completely

devoid of concern or outrage, "...perhaps you should say it to my filthy traitor face."

Bellatrix closed her mouth and narrowed her eyes at him. They were a darker, more intense gray than her cousin Sirius', but they still held the same dead, hollow look that only comes from years spent in Azkaban. Her hair, streaked with gray now, hung long and as lifeless as black straw down her shoulders. She walked up to Severus, totally unafraid or impressed with his nonchalance, and smiled. Some of her once-pearly teeth were gray or black, but she grinned almost childishly. "My dear Severus Snape." She pushed the 'p' in his last name out nastily. "You've graced us with your presence."

Severus inclined his head politely. "I have."

"Oh good," she purred. Everyone around them stood silent; even Lucius. They watched the exchange intensely. "So you're here to explain to us why you did not report that Dumbledore has left Hogwarts, then?"

Snape's gaze left hers to glance around the room at his fellow Death Eaters; all were waiting for his answer. He looked at Bellatrix again and shook his head slightly. "I will not do anything of the sort."

Everyone went into motion, especially Bellatrix, who's swimming gray eyes flashed angrily before she let out a sharp yelp of absurd laughter. The others spoke in protest; Dolohov's grunting becoming more aggressive. "Ha! Oh you won't? You traitor! You had no intention of reporting this, did you?"

"Bellatrix, get control of yourself, you sound ridiculous," Snape said, his tone as impatient as when he reprimanded a student. "Lucius was informed, and I can see that he told you, so what are you whining about?"

"You—!" she sputtered, "Of course Lucius told us! He, unlike you dog, is loyal to the Dark Lord! It was the fat toad woman who passed the message along, Snape." Again, he felt her saliva hit his face as she pushed out his name contemptuously.

“On the contrary, dogs are very loyal, Bellatrix.”

“Do not jest with me, Severus. When it comes to the Dark Lord, I have more loyalty in my little finger than you will ever-!”

“Hush, Bella...” Rookwood spoke up from a dark corner of the cold room. He was leaning against the wall, watching Snape and Bellatrix quietly. His brown eyes were half-covered by the shadow of his black hood. Bellatrix fumed, but didn’t finish. Rookwood addressed Snape. “Why didn’t you contact one of us immediately?”

Snape took the time to wipe the tiny bit of Bella’s spittle from the bridge of his nose before answering.

“I did what I could.”

Bellatrix scoffed. “You expect us to believe you sent that woman to Lucius in your stead?”

“I expect you to accept what I tell you, Bellatrix,” Severus spoke without looking at her. Rookwood was still staring at him intensely and at that moment it seemed important not to break eye contact, “because I do not report to you—any of you. I report to the Dark Lord. Those are his wishes. If you’d like to take issue with him, I beg you to remember poor Avery...”

There was silence all around.

After a pause, Rookwood seemed to accept Snape’s statement. He almost visibly shivered under his robe, and Severus knew that he was remembering the last time he’d been in Voldemort’s presence.

“I also report to the Dark Lord, you fool!” Bellatrix was the only one not satisfied with his ‘explanation’. “And it was I who told him of Dumbledore’s flight!”

“Good for you,” Severus smiled. “I’m sure that made you feel very useful.”

“What?” Her eyes shrank to narrow slits. “What did you say to me?”

"What did the Dark Lord say when you told him this?" Snape seemed genuinely curious, and it threw her visibly off-guard.

Bellatrix stood up straight and crossed her arms, still glaring at Severus. "What do you mean, filth?"

"I see your ability to come up with names to throw at me is ever-improving. What did he say to you, Bellatrix?"

"He..." she paused, almost unsure of herself. "He already knew."

"I see. And, who then, could have told him before you, ever faithful and loyal as you are?"

"It wasn't you, so don't pretend--!"

"No, I confess I did not go to him as quickly and desperately as you did, no not at all...but who did?" Snape feigned regret and even envy of what he was describing as her desperate need to matter to Voldemort as much as he himself did once again. He paused, looking at them all expectantly. None of them said a word. "None of you? No one?" he leered at them. "Of course not."

"But you are the one who was there!" Bellatrix shouted angrily.

"Precisely, and if anyone would tell him it would be me, but I did not need to!" Severus snapped, losing his cool for the first time during their argument.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean, Snape?" MacNair asked in his raspy voice from the other corner of the room.

"Well, since you're all so starved for information, allow me to elaborate." Severus directed his next statement directly to Bellatrix, who stood gawking at him as he told them all slowly and clearly: "The Dark Lord and the Potter boy are connected. Dumbledore has instructed me to teach the child Occlumency in order to protect him, but I have in fact been making sure that just the opposite happens."

"You...you're lying..." The look on her face was priceless, for her snide demeanor had vanished.

"Believe what you will, Bellatrix, but I tell you now—if you want to discredit me you will have to do much more than bellyache over things about which you know absolutely nothing." This was the end of the conversation, as far as Severus was concerned. He turned, while Bellatrix was still trying to sputter out a retort, and addressed Lucius. The master of the Malfoy household had remained silent during the entire exchange, his arms crossed and his expression thoughtful. "Lucius, I must speak with you alone."

Lucius nodded. "Very well."

"You're all just going to let him walk away? He hasn't explained anything."

"Bella, give it a rest, will you?" Lucius said, putting his hands on her shoulders. "You've lost this fight, my love."

"Don't touch me, Lucius," Bellatrix shook away from his touch. "Where is my sister? Where is Narcissa?"

"Upstairs being miserable, I assume." Lucius sighed irritably and stepped aside as Bellatrix shoved past him. She sneered at Snape before disappearing to find Narcissa.

"Would you gentlemen mind waiting here?" Lucius asked the other Death Eaters. Rookwood shook his head but said nothing. "We can go over a few things while Bella licks her wounds with Narcissa. And, I think, without her here they'll be easier to discuss uninterrupted..."

Severus followed Bellatrix, at a distance, up to the foyer again where they parted ways in a cold silence. He showed himself to the second floor study, where Lucius and he had held many important conversations over the years.

A few moments later, Lucius entered behind him and closed the door.

"What is it, Severus? If it's about Draco, I'll speak to him, but--"

"Lucius, can you tell me the symptoms of Fermentum poisoning?"

Lucius blinked in surprise, but recovered quickly. His piercing blue eyes shown as he shook his head slowly. "What does that have to do with Draco?"

Severus turned from Lucius and strolled casually over to the large bookshelf lining the wall to their left. He lifted his hand and ran his fingertips along a shelf, seeking something out. As he searched, he spoke very clearly, as if addressing a classroom. "For example, I remember the most common and often the first visible sign of Fermentum poisoning is unexplained, often irrational aggressiveness."

"Is it indeed?" Lucius asked cautiously from behind him.

Severus stepped over to another section, still searching out the book he wanted. "Yes, it is. And do you know another?"

"No."

"Pity. I always had the impression that you were an excellent student, Lucius. Then again," he plucked a book from the shelf and turned around on his heel to face Draco's father. He smirked. "I must say lately you have not displayed the sort of behavior that would suggest it..."

"What are you getting at, Severus?" Lucius crossed his arms again as he was prone to when preparing to outwit someone. Severus was not intimidated by this. "I assume this is something important, otherwise you're babbling about nothing in order to stall me from asking the real reason you didn't report to the Dark Lord..."

Snape handed the book he found, an old publication of the Ministry's log of illegal potions, over to Lucius with his finger on a marked page. "Other symptoms would be extreme confusion or loss of identity, obsession, increased physical strength yet decrease in mental stability...need I go on?"

"No...I have your point." Lucius snapped the book closed without looking at the marked page and tossed it on the desk.

"Your son is ill, Lucius."

"He is not ill, you're being--"

"Oh really? Can you explain, then, why he almost raped another student?"

There was a moment—just a moment—when Lucius seemed to take a physical blow. The two men stared at each other across the desk, the book lying face down between them, and Lucius tried to curb the swiftly rising feeling of dread. He tilted his head slightly at Professor Snape, clearing his throat weakly. He attempted a slight smile.

"I don't understand...what do you mean by that?"

Snape did not have sympathy; he repeated himself. "Do not feign ignorance; even for someone as frigid an aristocrat as you are, you cannot tell me you don't know what that means. A girl, Lucius. A girl in Gryffindor House—your son forced himself on her."

"How do you know this?" Master Malfoy's voice was becoming colder and quieter; a sure sign that he was disturbed by this information, Severus knew.

"The girl went to Dumbledore."

Lucius scoffed. "From Gryffindor House, you say?"

"That's right."

"Who is she? Pure blood?"

"I fail to see what that has to do with anything."

"What is her name, Severus?"

Severus paused, understanding the point Lucius wished to make. But, that point was inconsequential. "Angelina Johnson, and yes she is pure blood."

"Johnson? The girl captain of their Quidditch team?" Lucius' smile spread across his cruel face. "Potter's little girlfriend, isn't she?"

"Yes." Severus saw it in his expression, but stood waiting for the words to come out of his smiling mouth.

Lucius leaned over the desk and rested his knuckles against it, shaking his head at his poor misguided Professor Snape. "Obviously, Severus, the little tramp is making up lies to get back at my son for seeing to it that Potter was removed from her sorry excuse for a Quidditch team!"

"Oh really? And the journal he has written claiming on every page that he is obsessed with her is of no significance?"

"She is a clever girl, to have fooled Dumbledore so completely..."

"If that were the case, do you really think I would come here? But it is not, and if you deny it again I shall be forced to take the truth from your corroded mind just as I did your son, and believe me I won't ask permission first!"

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me, Lucius."

Lucius snatched up the book and strode across the room angrily to replace it. "Do you even want the truth?" he asked, turning around to face Snape again, the smile now gone. "I'm sorry to say, old friend, but working as Dumbledore's pet has weakened you considerably. You've become as sentimental and egotistical as he is and it's only a matter of time before you trip over your own arrogance."

"Fine." Snape reached into his robes to retrieve his wand. "Have it your way."

Lucius knew that he had never mastered the art of Occlumency when he attempted to learn it (ironically from Snape) years ago. It always infuriated him to know that Severus could hide things in his own mind if he wanted when Lucius himself couldn't. It also made him burn with contempt to realize that his son's godfather could also see inside the mind of anyone not stronger than he was in that department. This was not a skill the Dark Lord taught his followers, and for good reason.

"Keep your wand in your pocket, Severus."

Obligingly, Snape removed his hand from his robes. "And while you're at it, you can explain why I found myself having to give him remedies for the torture you've inflicted on him."

"What?"

"Denying it again?"

"I shall throw you from my house if you keep at that..."

"Cruciatus, Lucius." Snape sounded out each syllable of the curse sharply. "You're familiar? Pain beyond comprehension, over and over again, on a fifteen year old boy?!"

"Well that's what the Fermentum was for, of course." Lucius said almost casually.

"Draco is too young! You could have killed him, illegal potion or no, what in Merlin's name is the matter with you?"

"We are on the brink of war!" exploded Lucius, his normally pale complexion firing up as he glared at his accuser. "And you know, as well as I, that the Dark Lord will call on everyone to serve him. The punishment for resistance is death."

"He can hardly be killed by the Dark Lord if you've already tortured him to his grave, can he?"

The taller, white-blond haired man walked up to the other and stood mere inches away, his eyes swimming with anger and guilt. These two men had been polar opposites in Draco's life. Where as Lucius was the boy's father, and claimed to love him, the simple fact was that Severus was the only one who really acted like he did. Narcissa named Severus her son's godfather as a gift, both for herself and for Severus. And...for her son. The cruelty of the situation was—Draco was not Severus' son, and so doing the right thing by the child often set him against dear old Lucius.

"I want you to answer a question for me, Uncle Severus," Master Malfoy whispered through clenched teeth. "Did you really expect Draco to come out with greasy black hair and a crooked nose?"

Severus took a step into Lucius, and the two men's hands inched towards their wands. The row he'd had with Sirius Black in Black's kitchen did not cut as deep, and would not mean as much in the world of Severus Snape. He warned the man in his face with his eyes not to continue speaking, but to no avail. It was clear that Lucius enjoyed this.

"Did you expect my son to one day call you 'Papa'? Perhaps after I'm gone you and my wife could be together again, eh? If you coddle him and baby him now, you can earn his respect later, is that the plan?"

"Lucius—you are making a mistake that will cost you more than Draco's life."

"Get out of my house."

Snape took a step back but did not leave. "When you are gone, Lucius, I do not expect Draco to call me 'papa'. He is not my son. He is yours. So when you are gone, I will tell him what his father did to him, if he survives what you've gotten him into. And we shall see whom he respects."

"Get out! Bella is right, Merlin help me for admitting it! You are not loyal to us, you are not loyal to the Dark Lord, you are loyal only to yourself and it will be your downfall, Severus!"

“And torturing your son so that he might make a better sacrifice to the Dark Lord’s wrath than the one who deserves it, which is you—that is loyalty, is it? It seems more like cowardice to me.”

“Leave now Severus or I’ll--!”

“What? Give me a taste of Draco’s medicine?”

Wands were drawn in a flash and the study was soon filled with angry incantations and streaks of light. Narcissa and Bellatrix watched Severus exit the house with sweat pouring down his temples and his hand shaking violently. Seconds later Lucius came down, his face red and his own hands pressed to his ribs.

“Lucius, what happened?” Narcissa gasped, going to him. He thwarted her attempt to see to his wound, and instead gestured for Bellatrix.

“Bella, come with me down to the others. I have a plan—we shall deliver the prophecy to the Dark Lord and when we do...”

“I hope you’re telling me that you see it too? Snape’s corruption?”

“Bella!” Narcissa cried, scandalized. “How could you say such a--?”

“Be quiet, Cissy!” Bellatrix snapped, still eyeing Lucius.

“Come with me, Bella. I have a plan.”

Without another word, Bellatrix and Lucius went back down to resume their meeting. They left Narcissa in the hall fuming—afraid for her son, and now afraid for her former lover.

Chapter Thirty-Five: The Question of Professor Snape

The darkness was penetrated by a single rectangle of light peeking out at him from behind the door.

And the door was beckoning him.

The mystery of the thing that lay behind it called out to him so that he ached to reach it. He moved toward it with the speed of thought, and the light pulsed for him as his heartbeat pulsed in his chest—how he wanted and needed what was behind this door.

Harry reached out a hand—reached out as he had done so many times, week after week for month after month. He prepared himself for the disappointment of this door's refusal to open for him. But he was surprised to find that the door opened easily this time, and it swung away from his touch silently.

Harry felt his whole body react with triumph and excitement. He moved on...

Angelina's eyes struggled open when she realized through the thick fog of sleep that Harry was tossing and turning next to her.

She turned to look at him—he was moving his legs up and down, like he was walking even as he lay there, and there was a strained expression disturbing his features. He made a small noise before reaching his hand out to her, groping for her. She took his hand.

"Harry, wake up," she whispered softly.

"Wha...? Shit!" He jerked away from her touch and cursed, flopping his head back on his pillow in exasperation. Angelina lay still as Harry closed his eyes and let the disappointment seep out of him slowly. He opened his eyes again to stare above him, but he didn't see the canopy. He saw the dusty glass orb with the light shining at him that he'd only just been about to close his fingers around before Angelina woke him up. Of course, she had no way of knowing this—he wasn't angry with her. He was just tired...he knew that tomorrow night he

would have to go through the same thing all over again. He'd been right there...

"What is it?"

Harry shook his head slightly. "I almost had it."

"...what?"

"I don't know what it was..." Harry paused, allowing something disturbing occur to him. "But Voldemort wants it."

There was a chill in the air. It was still early morning. The sunlight approaching the windows was pale and did not carry much warmth. Harry's nose was cold. Angelina rubbed her feet together in effort to warm them. They were silent but awake. The other boys, having become accustomed to Angelina's presence among them since she'd been dating their roommate, slept on.

"Why am I seeing these things..." Harry slid down until the comforter covered half his face and pulled Angelina closer to him, welcoming her body heat. They hadn't been asleep for very long, and he was still drained from the night before.

Angelina held his head against her chest, also feeling very tired.

She sat thinking for a long pause, but then resolved that now was as good a time as any. They might as well have been alone, what with his roommates sleeping like rocks and at least an hour before anyone would be getting up to face the day. She stroked his hair as his head rose and fell with the slow rhythm of her breathing.

"Dumbledore said that dreams are vehicles. He said they tell us important things, whether we know what they are or not..."

There was a long silence, and at first she thought Harry had fallen asleep again. But he spoke after a moment, and as he did his warm breath tickled her stomach through her nightshirt. "I was in a room full of shelves..."

“Shelves?”

“Hmm...there must’ve been a hundred of them or more.”

“With books?”

“No. Other things...I’ve never seen things like these before...and it was so quiet in there. The whole place was covered with dust.”

“Is it a real place?”

Suddenly, Harry’s arms drew tighter around her waist. He nodded against her stomach. “Department of Myst...” he muttered and his voice was drowned out by a yawn that caused her abdomen to shrink away from the warm breath.

Angelina paused, making sure Harry hadn’t fallen asleep again, before taking a breath and whispering, “Harry? I wanted to tell you something.”

He lifted his head from her stomach, his eyes catching the light from the window. He looked about ready to hear more bad news. “Tell me what?” Angelina opened her mouth, but before she could utter a word the door burst open and Hermione came rushing in, her bushy brown hair all over her head and her brow knitted with anger. “Hermione?!” he groaned, but she ignored his irritation.

“She’s gone and done it!” she shouted, causing all four of Harry’s sleeping roommates to jerk awake. With groggy eyes they all peered at her curiously. Dean asked in a croak what time it was as Hermione continued, “Umbridge has named herself Headmistress!”

“What?!” Ron, Seamus, and Neville sat straight up in their beds.

Hermione held up a fresh, crisp piece of parchment with Umbridge’s familiar writing scrawled across its face. “I found this downstairs on the bulletin board.” Shaking with righteous anger, Hermione read the decree stating that effective that morning, Delores Umbridge had replaced Albus Dumbledore as Headmistress of Hogwarts.

"No surprises there," Dean muttered, sitting up in bed with his eyes closed.

Harry sighed and nodded his agreement. "I'm surprised she didn't put them up last night..."

"Ooooh I'd like to ring her fat neck!" Hermione snarled, balling up the parchment and throwing it in the trash. Ron patted his comforter for her to take a seat. Angrily, she sank herself down onto his bedside and crossed her arms. "Dumbledore's not even gone for twenty four hours and she's already got her pompous, puffed-up arse sitting at his desk, I'll bet!"

Everyone seemed surprised that Hermione was speaking that way, but all of them knew that today was going to the beginning of the longest few months in their school careers. Not only did they have O.W.L. exams to worry about, and the last Quidditch match of the season coming up, but now they would have to spend the rest of their school days before summer squirming under the boot heel of Delores Umbridge.

—BY ORDER OF—

The Headmistress of Hogwarts

Effective this morning, The High Inquisitor shall replace Albus Dumbledore as Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and will hereby be addressed as HIGH MISTRESS OF SHITE!!

Furthermore, effective today, an approved group of KISS ARSE students shall be appointed to the new Inquisitors Squad by the HIGH MISTRESS OF OOZY TROLL BOGIES!!

The Inquisitors Squad (PUFF PATROL) will be identified by their badges.

The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number Twenty-eight.

Signed,

Delores Umbridge, Headmistress OF MINSITRY SCUM!!

"Honestly, Ron, it's not funny..." Hermione attempted to say this with a straight face. She couldn't quite muster a stern expression, but Harry could see that she at least wanted to express disapproval without cracking a smile. She failed, of course.

They were sitting under their tree, watching the sun go down just before dinner. The lake shimmered with the reflection of the lavender skyline, and the three of them sat chuckling about the graffiti that someone (the twins, no doubt) scribbled on Umbridge's decrees all over the school.

"Come on, Hermione, even you have to admit--" Ron said between bouts of laughter that reddened his face so that his freckles were almost invisible, "--watching Filch scramble around on his old joints to find whoever did it before they could mess up another one was hilarious!"

Hermione's face twisted uncomfortably before she finally let out a chuckle. "Ha ha, well fine. It was funny, okay?"

"Thank you for finally admitting it," Ron said as they all stood and brushed themselves off before starting back up to the castle in sync. He frowned a moment later. "I just don't get how they did it so fast. And without getting caught!"

"I heard somebody say they bewitched the decrees to write on themselves...but no way they had time..."

"They had help," Harry said.

"From who?" both Hermione and Ron turned to look at him suspiciously.

"I lent them my cloak."

"Oh Harry!" Hermione chastised before Ron jumped in.

"Did you go round with them?"

"Of course not!" Harry said with a grin.

They entered the Great Hall minutes later only to be headed off by Angelina. "Ron," she said before any of them could greet her, "Eat and run—I want to practice while the pitch is free."

Ron attempted to roll his eyes in protest, but Angelina fixed him with a look.

"All right, all right, fine. Lemme grab a drumstick; I'll be out there in a minute, then."

"Good, great. See you."

Harry watched as she left them, feeling a mix of apprehension and disappointment. Ron gripped all the way over to the table, where he did indeed grab a single turkey drumstick, clamp it in his mouth, and wave 'see ya later' to everyone. Ginny and Dean were already gone. As Harry and Hermione sat down she turned to face him with a concerned expression. "How are the two of you?"

Harry shrugged and reached for a platter. "We're good."

"Well that's good...right?"

Harry remembered the talk he and Angelina had that morning during break in the library. Before Hermione had burst into the room furious about the decree, Angelina had been about to tell him something. He let it go when everyone got up and didn't say anything during breakfast, but when their free period came he couldn't wait any longer. He found her in the library pretending to study.

"What did you want to tell me?" he asked before sitting across from her near a window.

Angelina closed her textbook and peered over at him, looking as if she had been waiting for him to come and find her. She sighed. "I'm not sure you'll want to hear it."

Harry set his jaw, his eyes flickering up and down at her expectantly. "Well, what is it?"

She sighed. "I think—I-I mean I hope that this doesn't turn out to be the case, but...I don't think Malfoy will ever get it through his head to leave me alone."

"This again?" said Harry sharply. "I don't want to talk about him. If this is all you had to tell me, forget it."

"Harry--"

He stood up again, his chair scraping back against the floor loudly. Madame Pince appeared behind him and hissed sternly, "Five points from Gryffindor!"

"Fine." Harry muttered, suddenly very angry. "I was just leaving."

Pince sniffed indignantly at him and swept away. Harry threw his bag over his shoulder and took a step, but Angelina had taken hold of his arm before he got far. "Hey, sit down, will you?"

"Angelina..."

"Please. That isn't all I was going to say."

Sighing, Harry sat down again, quietly. "I'm sorry I got mad," he sighed. "But I thought we went over this last night."

Angelina nodded her understanding. "I know. But it's just I have to tell you something and...I have to tell you all of it. That means you'll have to listen to some stuff you don't want to hear...for a bit."

Harry looked at her—he could see she was just trying to be honest with him. After all that happened, he understood what she was trying to do. He didn't like it, but he would listen. "Okay..."

"I want to help you. I want to help you figure out this...whatever this is that's happening to you. But we can't if you're still hung up about Malfoy."

"He's hung up on you, more like..."

"I know. But there's nothing for us to do about it. We can't stop him."

"Who says I can't?" Harry uttered incredulously.

"Well, you did almost kill him, Harry. If that didn't teach him his lesson..."

Harry sat fuming. He hadn't seen the little shit at all that morning, not even at breakfast. Not that he cared to. He was likely to start another duel, no matter where or when, and so he considered it a good thing they hadn't crossed paths yet.

"So what are you saying? Why can't I stop him from bothering you?"

"He's ill."

Harry scoffed loudly. Angelina looked around for Pince, but the old librarian was busy harassing a group of seventh years. "What's wrong with him? He's screwed up in the head? I could've told you that."

"He's being given potions."

"Potions for what?"

"It's his father. You were right; he does want Draco to be a Death Eater."

"Potions for what?"

"To make him stronger. Dumbledore thinks--"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Dumbledore thinks? I forgot—you went and told him about this last night, didn't you?" Angelina nodded, and

Harry felt almost triumphant for a second before he realized that Dumbledore was gone. "Well I guess I don't need to ask how it went..." he shifted in his seat and watched her watching him before asking: "You told him...everything?" She nodded again. "And he told you Malfoy's dad is giving him potions?"

"That's what he thinks is happening, yes. The potions—they're dangerous if made too powerful or taken too much. They make people crazy. Dumbledore thinks Draco's father was probably willing to take that risk for some reason."

"What has Malfoy being crazy got to do with you?"

"Harry..." Angelina didn't really want to say it aloud. "He read what Draco wrote in the playbook. Dumbledore says he's obviously confused about why he's acting the way he is...he can't help it."

"He can't help it?" Harry repeated in amazement. He started to raise his voice, but remembered where they were and leaned forward to whisper to her over the study table. "Angelina he tried to rape you! Didn't Dumbledore understand that? Who bloody cares if he's being given a thousand potions a day and if they make him as loopy as Luna Lovegood—he tried to hurt you."

"There is more to it than that, Harry. Dumbledore didn't tell me everything, but I'm not stupid. I can tell...there is something holding him back. And maybe he would have expelled Draco but there is something going on behind the scenes that affects him...personally."

"Wait--wait...so he wasn't going to expel that bastard? Oh, I don't believe this!" He had been operating on the assumption that Dumbledore's decision to get rid of that sniveling ferret had been thwarted by the discovery of the D.A. but now she had just shot that out of the water. If his frustration with Dumbledore had gone away for the old wizard's sacrifice, it was quickly returning now. He thought what McGonagall told him in the hall was truer now than ever—Harry was really on his own.

Harry rolled his eyes to the ceiling and turned away from her to look out the window. He saw, in the distance, a flock of birds scattering

from the net of trees that made up the Forbidden Forest, screeching faintly as they flew. There was movement in the treetops; they shook and swayed as if stirred by a strong wind or an invisible hand. Harry thought it an odd sight, but his anger over what Angelina was telling him put the thought away.

“So you and Dumbledore put your heads together to try and save poor Malfoy, then.” He turned to face her again.

“Actually I don’t care what happens to Malfoy. I care about you. And so does Professor Dumbledore.”

At dinner later that night, Hermione chewed her food thoughtfully. Harry scooped up some gravy and poured it over his mashed potatoes, letting her figure out which of the barrage of questions she no doubt had to ask him first. Hermione swallowed her food. “You didn’t leave it at that, did you?”

Harry shook his head. “No...”

Angelina explained that Dumbledore had asked her not to repeat what they discussed, but she said...almost as though having a revelation...that she felt he expected more from her than just her silence. “I know he wanted me to help you—and he must’ve realized that I just can’t do that without telling you everything I know.”

“Everything he told you...”

Harry held his breath, the prospect of learning something new about this strange power of his very exciting.

“Right.”

They huddled together, their heads hovering over the table as they lowered their voices so that only the two of them could hear what they were saying. Angelina relayed some of the things Dumbledore had told her, including his theory on Harry’s anger. Dumbledore believed that at this point in time, anger was what fueled Harry’s new ability. This was not good. Especially since lately Harry’s anger had become quite potent—he was not only experiencing frustration as result of his

many problems with Malfoy and Umbridge among other people, but also he was being fed explosive emotions from Voldemort at an unpredictable rate.

"Let me guess," Harry whispered to Angelina, "this is where Occlumency comes in?"

"Yeah." She smiled apologetically. "Dumbledore thinks that once you can block out You-Know-Who, you'll be able to better control your emotions—specifically your temper—and then you can learn to control your power."

Harry sighed, softening for the first time in the conversation. He reached across the table and fiddled with her fingers thoughtfully.

"I know I have to do better at this Occlumency stuff...I get it. It's just...bloody Snape."

"Harry, I saw Snape's face when you destroyed Dumbledore's office last night—he's scared! He doesn't know any more than we do about what's happening to you! Don't let him give you a hard time."

"Oh yeah, that'll be easy..." he said, remembering the terrible argument...and the desk.

"Yes, it could be." Angelina smiled encouragingly. "You just go in there knowing that no matter what he says, you are there for a reason. You are important to Dumbledore, you're important to the Order!"

Harry looked up from her fingers sharply. "Dumbledore said that?"

"Dumbledore said that?" Hermione asked through a mouth full of food. Harry grinned and nodded.

In the library, Angelina had done the same.

"Well, why did he tell you all this? Why couldn't he tell me?"

"I know he had his reasons, Harry..."

“Everyone says that. What else did he tell you? Does this keep happening to me only because I get upset?”

“He didn’t really explain that. He just said that as long as you and You-Know...V-Voldemort are connected, you’ll never be able to control what happens when this power comes over you. He also said that it’s very dangerous...if Voldemort ever found out you can do these things...”

“That’s why Occlumency is so important, Harry.” Hermione told him as they were finishing their dessert. The two of them got up at the end of supper and fell into step at the back of the dense queue to leave the Great Hall. Harry received many woeful looks from various D.A. members no doubt mourning the loss of their weekly meetings.

He unconsciously looked around for any sign of Malfoy, but received none. The top of that slick blond head was nowhere to be found. In Transfiguration that afternoon, they’d all watched as Filch delivered a note to Professor McGonagall, who read over it with a blank expression before starting the class. Malfoy didn’t show up, and Harry suspected that note was about him.

“Speaking of Occlumency,” he sighed once they’d reached the Grand Entrance Hall. “I’d better go—I don’t want to be late for my torture session with Snape.”

“Don’t think of it that way, Harry. Remember what Angelina said.”

“Right. See ya later, ‘Mione.”

They parted ways—Hermione off to study while she waited for Ron to return from Quidditch practice, and Harry down to the dungeons to face Snape.

“Before we begin, Potter,” Snape stood in his usual place behind the now very stationary desk with his arms folded. “I’ve been instructed to apologize to you for our argument at the end of the last lesson.”

“Instructed?” Harry couldn’t help himself. Snape’s eyes flashed, but he nodded.

"Yes. It is my duty to guide you in mastering Occlumency, nothing more, and allowing the argument we had grow to the point it did was out of the question. It won't happen again." This last sounded more like a threat than an amends. Harry didn't say anything—he was quite skeptical of this so-called 'apology', but frankly he didn't give a damn if Snape was sorry or not. He just wanted to get through this time without incident. If that meant listening to some fake 'I'm sorry' then so be it. "That having been said," Snape continued, less laboriously this time now that the hard part was over, "I expect you to put more effort into our lessons from now on, understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"That means you will no longer stand there using the time that I am talking to figure out what you're going to say next, Potter."

"I know sir." Snape raised an incredulous eyebrow and Harry realized he had just done what he was told not to. "I mean...sorry."

"That also means no more excuses. You will do as I say the way I say it, is that clear? You are to occlude your mind every evening before you fall asleep, no exceptions."

"Yes sir..."

Snape paused, almost surprised that he was receiving no argument from Harry. Once he was satisfied that the rules were clear, he picked up his wand. "Now...we are going to try a different approach."

"A different one?"

"Yes, Potter," said Snape impatiently. "Does repeating everything I say increase your chances of actually learning it?"

Harry shrugged. "Maybe..."

Snape rolled his eyes. "To learn and master Occlumency, you must do it in steps; on different levels." He paused, his eyes flickering at Harry as he observed the boy to make sure he was paying attention,

before continuing, “The first step is to learn to block out your intruder by closing your mind to him. The next...and this may take a while since you still have not managed to pull that one off consistently...is to learn to manipulate the shields you used to protect your mind, and so on and so forth. Now I want you to do what you were doing at our last lesson.”

“You mean...?” Harry was at first thinking that Snape wanted him to levitate the desk. But then he remembered his mediation. “Oh that. All right.”

“Ready your wand.” Harry did as he was told and fished his wand out of his pocket. He stood at the ready, planting his feet firmly to the office floor, letting out a deep breath. “Do you remember what you did? Think back...think back to when you overtook me.”

“I-I used this form of meditation I learned.”

“Learned from where?”

“In a book...”

“You don’t say? What book, Potter?”

“A book about dueling...” Harry felt his nostrils flaring and his cheeks burning with reluctance, but he fancied that if Snape was going to turn him in for dueling, then there was nothing he could really do about it. He didn’t mind the idea of not being at school now that Umbridge was running the show—he would just go stay with Sirius.

“I suspected as much...” Snape regarded him with an appraising look for a moment. “And where is it, then? Knowing your arrogance, it’s sure to be in your spine...”

“My heart, actually.” Harry corrected, referring to his center.

Snape raised his wand again. “So. As with the exercise you learned, you will need a release of power. You will use that release to block my attack, but you will try not use a spell that will destroy my office,

Potter." Harry nodded that he understood. "Ready? One—two—three—Legilimens!"

Right before Snape cast the spell, Harry remembered what Angelina and Hermione said. He needed to try harder at this. He needed to focus. Never mind that Snape was a menace, and never mind that the phony truce between them was sure to buckle before the end of this lesson—he needed to figure out a way to control it, whatever 'it' was.

Though he realized quickly that he wouldn't be mastering anything just yet. Before he could muster the concentration, he felt the effects of the spell, and found himself standing in front of the open door with the shimmering silver light beaming out at him. Harry began to run, and though he heard no footfalls, he propelled himself through the door and...

....he was suddenly in the room with those rows upon rows of shelves...running...running...until he found the shelf he was looking for—he didn't really know it was the one until he felt himself turning...he reached the end of the row...almost there! Harry stopped at the end and looked up to see the dusty glass orb resting above the plaque with his name on it...all he had to do was grab it...

"Potter!" The vision swept away and he was once again standing in Snape's office. Harry was sweating, but still on his feet. Snape looked angry finally, his dark eyes blazing. "You have not been practicing!"

"No," admitted Harry, actually relieved to have normal, spiteful Snape back. "I haven't."

"How many times must I remind you how absolutely imperative it is for you to close your mind to these dreams?"

"I know how important it is—that doesn't mean it's come easy!" He couldn't help himself—he had promised Angelina and Hermione (and himself) that he would try his best, but the extreme curiosity he felt each and every time he made it further in that dream tugged at him mercilessly. "Every time I have that dream lately," he started to earnestly explain this to Snape, hoping that the Master Occlumens

could at least understand where he was coming from, “I keep getting closer and closer, but I always wake up right before I find out what it all means.”

Snape stood silent for a moment, gathering his patience. “Listen to me, Potter—try to cram every word I am saying into that obtuse little brain of yours...” He paused, as if to allow Harry time to prepare for what he would say next. “What lies in the room you see in your dreams is not important.”

“How can you be so su--?” Harry started, but Snape silenced him by coming around the desk and standing inches from him, lowering his face so that they were at eye level.

“In fact, the longer you linger on this desire to solve the ‘great mystery’, the closer you bring yourself to the Dark Lord’s grasp. He will find you, Potter—and he will lure you to him like a spider does its prey. Trust what I say when I tell you nothing in the Department of Mysteries is worth your inevitable death should you continue down this path...”

Harry felt his gut reaction to protest spur in him yet again, but he stopped himself. Icky as it was, Snape was probably right. Dumbledore was probably right. And Angelina believed in him. He took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay...sorry.”

Snape again looked surprised, but the expression faded swiftly and was replaced by a curled lip and a curt nod. “Now...” he walked around behind his desk and resumed the familiar position. “Again.”

They tried again—and then again. Harry tried harder each time to block the spell, but each time he found himself in that dusty hall lined with shelves. Snape yelled at him to concentrate, but not with impatience or malice like before. Instead he raised his voice with earnest urgency and concern: “Concentrate, Potter—use what you know! You can block my advances, but you must empty yourself of emotion and try...now again!”

They went on and on—Harry had no idea what time it was, but then something happened. Snape raised his wand the way he had a

dozen times before and uttered the incantation of the spell. Determined, Harry pushed himself to empty his mind of emotions, and so held himself still. He breathed in and out. That place of complete solitude found him very quickly this time—if he weren't concentrating so hard he would have been surprised at the ease with which the world dropped away...

Harry heard nothing. Felt nothing. He might as well have been asleep; only there were no dreams...

And then he felt a flood of power sweep through him head to toe—it was a feeling so great that it overwhelmed his concentration, but it passed quickly. Harry heard a faint voice calling to him.

“Potter...”

He began to come down. When his vision came back to him, he was immediately blinded by a brilliant light, and he had to raise his free hand to shield his eyes. Snape was barely visible across from him. He was not being obstructed by his own desk this time, however, but the large spectral form of Harry's stag—his Patronus. It was stamping its hooves and its huge horns were swaying to and fro with its head.

Through his awe, Harry suddenly realized something and looked down to see that his wand hand was resting at his side, his wand pointed at one of the legs of Snape's desk. He looked back up at Snape sharply.

“Interesting...” uttered the Potions Master as the brilliant animal began to fade away and the light passed over his dark features.

“What happened?” breathed Harry, looking back down at his wand stupidly.

“You successfully occluded your mind, Potter—and you conjured a Patronus without the use of your wand.” Snape fell silent again and they stood there staring at each other, both trying in his own way to understand what was happening to Harry Potter. Harry had so many questions, and they were all crashing together loudly in his mind, but he couldn't single out just one to ask first. Snape raised his wand

again slowly and Harry readied himself, doing his best to quiet his thoughts. "Let's go again."

Before they could continue, however, there was a short knock on the door and Draco Malfoy stepped in. "Professor--oh...I'm sorry I didn't mean to interrupt."

Upon hearing his voice, Harry turned to face the boy he hadn't seen since the night before. At the very sight of him, Harry felt his anger rising so swiftly that he had to grip his wand tightly in effort not to do something rash. Draco stared at Harry before Snape cleared his throat pointedly.

"That's fine, Draco. Potter is just here for a bit of Remedial Potions...what is it?"

Harry felt his cheeks go crimson and looked away from Draco first. The small defeat was nothing compared to what could happen if he were allowed a few minutes alone with the creep, he promised himself silently.

"Er—it's Montague, sir. He's turned up stuck in a toilet in the boy's lavatory on the third floor."

"He what?" Snape snapped, sweeping around the desk and heading for the door. "How in Merlin's name did he end up there?"

"I'm not sure, sir. He's all confused..."

"Damn it...we'll resume the lesson tomorrow night, Potter..."

Harry watched as Snape led the way out of the office, and bit his cheek hard to keep himself from beating the shit out of Malfoy—who backed up staring at Harry with a smirk in his eyes.

He was left alone, and after a moment of staring after them with images of torturing Malfoy swimming around in his mind, Harry realized that it probably wasn't a good idea to be having those thoughts and sighed. He needed to "empty himself of emotions" before bed tonight if he wanted to avoid having that dream again...

Harry slid his wand into his pocket and prepared to leave. As he was nearing the door, however, he caught a glimpse of something. A light...it seemed so familiar to him, this image of silvery light dancing off the door frame...beckoning to him...

He turned around and saw the source of the light across the room, behind Snape's desk.

Dumbledore's pensieve...

Harry found himself standing at a fork in the road—down one path, there was Snape and Snape's new approach to teaching Harry Occlumency. Harry had no idea what spurred the mentor in Snape to arise, but if he went down the other path he could kiss their truce goodbye. The other path was Harry's extreme curiosity—what did Snape have to hide? What memories (what information?) were swirling around so alluringly in that basin?

Almost without realizing it, Harry found himself choosing the latter path. His feet carried him away from the door, across the room, and ever closer to the stone basin with the shimmering light.

A practice drill—with the breezy night sky surrounding her and the smell of leather from her Quidditch gear reaching her nose every so often—was just what Angelina needed.

A lot of things had changed, but one thing that remained a constant in the seventh year's life was how much she loved Quidditch. It was an escape; something she was indisputably good at; something she could always count on when she needed it.

She loved the sound of her whistle echoing across the pitch.

She loved the rush of air as her teammates zoomed this way and that on their brooms all around her.

She loved the grunts of frustration or determination she heard.

She loved the sweat, the dirt, the sheer thrill of the game.

And when they were done; when that hour or two of practice was over, Angelina touched down and dismounted her broom feeling a whole lot better. Relaxed, she gathered her team around her for a huddle before she sent them off to the changing rooms.

“Good drill, guys,” she reassured them, looking from one sweaty face to the next around the circle. “Really—I think we’re ready. We’re gonna take the Cup back to Gryffindor Tower Saturday.” Everyone grinned at her, even Ron, and she went on. “Now, you guys all know there’s been a lot of stuff going on...Professor Dumbledore is gone.”

“Yeah and that bitch Umbridge is running the school now...” Katie Bell groaned under her breath.

“And a lot of us have been so stressed out this year that none of us have really been able to enjoy the game. Especially me; I’ve been...kind of preoccupied...and I’m sorry, guys.”

“You’re a great captain, Angelina.” Ginny offered earnestly.

“Yeah, we’d be rubbish without you,” Ron added. “And by ‘we’ I mean me.”

Chuckles all around—Dean gave Ron an affectionate punch on the arm. Angelina observed her group of misfits; noticeably Harry and the twins were missing, but they looked like a real team finally and that was the best she could’ve asked for. “We’re gonna play this one for Dumbledore...”

“Dumbledore!” shouted the team. “Dumbles...” muttered Ron.

On the way back up to the castle after changing, everyone grouped together in pairs as they walked the path, talking of Dumbledore’s flight and Umbridge’s failed attempts to gain entry to the Head’s office.

“I heard she had a nice little tantrum this morning,” Dean was saying to Ginny. “Filch had to calm her down before she started throwing spells at the gargoyle—what a twit.”

"I'll bet she just loved the idea of sitting her fat arse down at old Dumbledore's desk and using his things..." Ron shook his head sadly. "It's just as well nobody can get in there—Dumbledore should always be the headmaster of this school. When I have children of me own, I want him here to see after them."

"Even if he weren't still a fugitive by then, Ron, he'd be pretty old." Angelina laughed. "He might want to retire."

"Dumbles? Retire? Nah."

"Will this school still be standing when we have children?" Ginny stopped walking and peered up at the castle face thoughtfully. Everyone else stopped too, turning to regard her in shock before the possibility of no Hogwarts hit them. "I heard Mum saying that if the war starts... You-Know-Who will want Hogwarts destroyed. He hates the fact that purebloods and Muggle-borns study here together..."

"Blimey, Ginny, way to bring the mood down..." Dean whispered, glancing up at the castle too.

Angelina and Ron exchanged looks, and then Angelina turned to face Ginny. "Ginny, if the war starts, we'll be here to help fight for Hogwarts. If it goes down, we'll go down with it."

"Okay—this is not what I want to be hearing days before a match guys!" Alicia Spinnet shook her ponytail to and fro in effort to clear her mind of all depressing thoughts and moved past her fellow former D.A. members to enter the castle.

The other team members followed her, leaving just Angelina, Dean, Ron, and Ginny behind.

"I guess we shouldn't bring down team morale with talk of Voldemort and wars..." Angelina muttered. Ron looked at her with surprise. Understanding his awe, she shrugged. "I spent some time making myself repeat it over and over again. Surprisingly, if you picture a centaur with a top hat and cane doing a tap dance when you say it, it loses its menace after a while."

Ron rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “What about Umbridge in a tutu doing cartwheels?”

“Now that’s just plain disgusting!” Dean shook off the nasty image just as screams and loud noises erupted from the open doors of the Grand Entrance Hall. Startled, the four teammates hurried inside and as the doors closed behind them they saw groups and groups of students (with some teachers peppered in) hurrying up the marble stairs to investigate the origin of the noises.

“What in the world--?” McGonagall attempted to push her way up through a cluster of third years just as a huge purple Catherine wheel went “zeeeeee!” over her head. She ducked and gawked after it just as a loud BOOM! erupted.

Angelina and the others exchanged knowing looks with each other. “They’ve done it...” Ron muttered. “I don’t believe they’ve actually gone and set of fireworks in the school!”

“Fred and George did this?” Angelina asked, though she knew the answer was yes, as she watched a giant dragon composed entirely of blue sparks float past them headed for the Great Hall.

POP! BANG! ZIIINNNNNG!!

Dragons and Catherine wheels and sparklers and rockets were suddenly everywhere. The words ‘scum’, ‘bogey’, ‘poop’ and several others of a more mature nature began to circle the air above their heads. Snape was furious—he came stomping up from the dungeons with his wand drawn and his eyes blazing with anger. He grabbed a frightened first-year who was running to join the group on the stairs and shook him off his feet.

“Where are those coming from?” he demanded. The boy whimpered something unintelligible and Snape growled before letting him go.

“Up here, Severus!” McGonagall caught his attention.

Peeves the poltergeist was dancing around with a red Catherine wheel, giggling madly. “Umbridge is Ministry Scum, look at that one!”

he pointed to a cluster of sparks spelling out the word 'scum'. Another squeal of evil ecstasy erupted from him as he caught sight of one of the other, more mature word clusters, and he cackled: "Hahahaha! Umbridge's got a fuzzy cun--!"

"Quiet, Peeves!" Snape snarled as he plowed through students to get to McGonagall. "All of you get back to your common rooms this instant!"

"It's coming from up there," McGonagall gestured up the stairs. "Listen..."

Angelina and the others approached the stairs cautiously; Ginny ducking a flashing gold firework that was spinning crazily. They listened. Seconds later, through the noise of the fireworks, they could hear Umbridge screaming her head off.

"DON'T STUN THEM, FILCH! THE'LL MUTATE IF YOU--!"

"Watch out, Headmistress! That one's gonna--!"

BANG! POP-POP!

"AHH!!"

"Oh I wish I could see it!" Ron hissed. "We're missing it, we're missing it!"

"Missing what?" Snape rounded on them and Ron clamped his mouth shut and shook his head quickly. "Did you have anything to do with this?"

"N-No sir..."

"I don't believe you, Weasley," came the Potions Master's gritted reply.

"We were at Quidditch practice, sir." Angelina spoke up. "We didn't do this."

"Then who did?"

"WHERE ARE THEY? WHERE ARE THOSE LITTLE BEASTS?!" Umbridge came scurrying down the stairs above them, her face black with soot from an exploding firework.

"Oh let me whip them, Headmistress!" Filch limped down behind her. "Just give me a day or two alone with them in the dungeons! They'll be sorry!"

The entrance hall was now filling with students and teachers; the fireworks zoomed in and out of view—whistled and twirled and popped and sparkled. Green ones and purple ones and blue ones and gold ones! Umbridge waved her arms madly as she swatted her way through a blue 'NIPPLES' and pushed past Angelina towards the landing.

"You come out, you—you-you heathens!" she screamed to the throng of onlookers at large. "Crabbe, Goyle, haven't you got them yet?"

Crabbe and Goyle pushed their way through the crowd, shoving their "Inquisitors Squad" badges in peoples' faces as they did, until they reached the clearing. Goyle had Fred in a headlock. "Here's one of them, Headmistress!" he exclaimed through his heavy breathing. Fred twisted viscously from the hold and stumbled into the middle of the clearing.

Angelina's mouth dropped open and her heart began to beat furiously—they were caught! They'd be expelled! She felt so terrible, and she looked to Ron and Ginny to see identical looks of horror on their freckled faces.

Fred, however, was grinning from ear to ear.

Umbridge was furious. "You think this is funny, do you?"

"We think it's bloody hilarious," answered Fred. "Isn't that right, George?"

"Right, brother!"

George appeared suddenly from behind a cluster of students, also grinning and not looking worried about the consequences of their actions at all. Angelina gasped and grabbed hold of Ron, feeling suddenly queasy. What in the world were they doing?

“Well...” Umbridge was visibly shaking with rage, and her voice dropped dangerously low, so that the onlookers surrounding them could barely hear her. “You’ll soon learn what happens to students who show such disregard for my authority, oh yes...”

Fred chuckled. “Oh, I don’t think so.”

“Yeah,” George chimed in. “I don’t think we’ll be sticking around for that.”

“You what?” sputtered the headmistress.

“I think it’s time to test our talents elsewhere—see if our genius holds up in the real world, right Fred?”

“Right George.”

The twins drew their wands.

Even before they summoned their brooms from Umbridge’s office, Angelina’s heart sank into her shoes and she felt like the whole world had tipped over. The twins were talking...saying...something, and Umbridge was sputtering madly, but Angelina didn’t hear a word of it. She was watching through a tunnel, her eardrums being assaulted by the sound of her thumping heart, as the brooms came zooming down to them and they jumped on in unison. One of them shouted something to Peeves, and then with a glance at her the two boys were gone.

Ron turned to look at her, his expression more incredulous than surprised. “How in bloody hell did those two gits manage to open a shop in Diagon Alley...?”

Angelina didn’t answer—she was still in shock.

Harry paced the length of his dorm room anxiously, unable to rid himself of what he had just seen.

“Dumbledore has instructed me to teach the child Occlumency in order to protect him, but I have in fact been making sure that just the opposite happens...”

Harry’s fists were white from the pressure as he balled them up at his sides. He could feel the rage boiling in him, rising up, up, and up from the tips of his toes to the ends of his hair follicles. What could he do? What should he do? His instinct was to find Snape now while the terrible anger was building and use this power everyone was so fucking afraid of to stamp him out for good.

But Harry knew even if he could manage to inflict brutal harm on Snape that it would serve him no good. Everyone believed he was on the Order’s side—and even those who knew nothing about the Order would only see a student harming a teacher. No—they’d see Harry Potter harming a teacher. Umbridge would snatch him up like a greedy flytrap and serve him cooking to the Ministry. It would be off to Azkaban for him, and he knew it.

And then there was the other little tidbit he learned: Snape was protecting Malfoy. He was making sure no one else besides Dumbledore found out about what happened to Angelina because he didn’t want the little tosser to be expelled!

“Did you really expect Draco to come out with greasy black hair and a crooked nose?”

Of course! That was why Snape always looked the other way when Malfoy was being a prat; why he gave Draco points for no reason, why he always defended him in every situation.

Harry paced back and forth, oblivious to the distant cries of excitement or fright and the sounds of fireworks exploding that floated up to him from the halls beyond the common room. Hedwig flapped her wings twice anxiously, eyeing him as he moved about. She

snapped her beak at him as the feathers on her back began to stand up.

It was obvious to him now, wasn't it? Ron was right. Snape really had been softening him up for Voldemort. And now that Harry was showing signs of power, Snape was trying to find out how it worked so he could tell Voldemort everything! Harry knew better than to fall for that stupid 'apology'! But he had gone along with it, and Snape had probably been taking notes the whole time for his master.

"Goddamn it!" he shouted, scowling and kicking his trunk hard. Hedwig hooted loudly and flapped her wings again, moving away from him across the headboard. "Piss off, Hedwig..." he glared at her, suddenly angry at everyone and everything.

He was furious with Dumbledore—how could he be so blind? He was angry with Angelina for holding him back and Hermione for drumming stupid Snape and Occlumency into his brain over and over again. He was upset with himself for trusting that any of them knew what the hell they were talking about.

Harry stared at his trunk.

He couldn't think what to do...and then it came to him suddenly. Sirius.

The little wooden stag Sirius had carved for him for Christmas had fallen from the bedside table and onto the trunk when Harry kicked it.

He would tell Sirius and Sirius would believe him—if Sirius could convince Lupin and the others that what Harry saw was the truth, Snape would be called out and captured.

Harry got to his knees and opened the trunk, setting the stag on the bed and digging through the mountain of clothes, parchment, shoes, and random things until he reached the bottom, where the parcel Sirius had given him at Grimmauld Place lay unopened. Harry took it out and sat back on his haunches, looking around to make sure the door was closed before ripping open the brown wax paper. The

parcel was a small mirror, and Harry frowned at it before turning it over in his hands. On the back, Sirius had scrawled a message:

Harry,

Use this if you ever need me. Just look into it and say the name of who you want to speak to.

-Sirius

Licking his lips, Harry turned the mirror back over and stared into it. He saw his own frowning, bespectacled face staring back at him. Harry said sharply, "Sirius Black," and waited. The mirror surface washed black. Harry's face disappeared and was replaced by what looked to be a dusty ceiling. Harry tilted it in his hands, but the image did not change. Confused, he sat there for a moment before realizing that maybe he should say something. "Sirius? Hey—Sirius!"

He heard the faint sounds of footsteps and then Sirius' lined face appeared upside down. "Harry?" The boy's godfather broke into a smile and the image tipped around until his grinning face was right-side-up again. "Harry! What a surprise--!" Sirius's frown came back abruptly when he saw the look on Harry's face and he asked sharply, "What happened? Is it Snape? Did he do something?"

"Yeah it's Snape," Harry answered, truly glad to be talking to Sirius at all, even if it was to tell him what a dirty traitor Snape turned out to be.

"What's that tetchy blackguard done now?" Sirius demanded darkly.

"Sirius, he's a Death Eater!" The words flew out of Harry's mouth hotly, his temples throbbing with animosity. He expected an immediate answer from his godfather—he expected action; anger just like his. Instead Sirius blinked several times and tilted his head, frowning. "Well didn't you hear me?"

"Harry—Snape has always been a Death Eater. He's spying for the Ord--"

"No, I mean he's a real one!"

"Harry, don't shout." Sirius was being too quiet, too calm about this. Harry fought to control his temper. He did not wish to be angry with Sirius, but the older wizard was making it difficult. "Just calm down and tell me what happened, all right?"

Taking a deep breath, pushing his anxiety down as far as it would go, Harry tried again. "I saw—I saw a memory in Dumbledore's pensieve of Snape and the other Death Eaters."

Finally, Sirius looked interested and suspicious. "Go on..."

"Lucius Malfoy was there, and so was your cousin, that Bellatrix lady. And so was that Rookwood guy..."

"They were having a meeting?"

"Yeah—and Snape came with a letter from Dumbledore about Malfoy's son, Draco."

"Draco..."

"This really stupid kid in my year who's been messing with Angelina," replied Harry tersely.

"What did the letter say?"

"It was about how his dad's been poisoning him, but that's not what matters."

Sirius moved suddenly, and Harry's eyes blurred a little as he watched the image vibrate with Sirius's movement. He seemed to be backing up through whatever room he was in and sitting down. Harry could just barely see the details of the room through the tiny spaces around Sirius' head. He was in the bedroom that Ron and Harry shared when they were there over break. Harry could see the edge of Phineas Nigellus' frame over his godfather's shoulder.

"Lucius Malfoy has been poisoning his own son? With what?"

Harry took an irritated breath. “Sirius—focus. This isn’t about Malfoy; I’m trying to tell you Snape told them about me and Voldemort being connected!”

“He what?” Sirius ignored Harry’s rebuke and his eyes narrowed. “He told them that? Why?”

Harry retold everything he had seen, including what Snape had said about purposefully doing the opposite of teaching Harry to protect his mind from Voldemort’s invasion. “And Bellatrix said he already knew about Dumbledore, because he’d seen it through me!”

“Harry, are you absolutely certain this is what you saw?”

“Yes!”

Sirius was quiet for a long time. He frowned deeply and rubbed his chin, apparently turning the information over in his head. Harry sat impatiently, watching Sirius think all the while screaming in his head that something had to be done, now. Suddenly, Harry could hear the familiar sound of Mrs. Black screaming her head off, and Sirius was taken out of his thoughts. “Look, Remus is here--”

“Are you going to tell him about Snape?” Harry asked abruptly, breathing hard from the effort to contain himself. He was suddenly excited—Sirius would tell Lupin and then it was only a matter of time before Snape would be called out. Finally people would know that Harry had been right all along. Finally Dumbledore would see his mistake in trusting that sneaky bastard.

“Yes...but Harry, I don’t want you to do anything, all right?”

“Why the bloody hell not--?”

“No, I don’t want you telling this to another living soul, do you understand?”

“But what if someone asks why he stopped giving me lessons?”

"He stopped giving you lessons? What for?" Harry felt himself becoming agitated again; Sirius was still focusing on the wrong things. Mrs. Black stopped her screaming and then Lupin's voice could be heard, calling Sirius' name. "In here, Remus!"

Harry heard nearing footsteps and then Lupin's voice again, much closer. "Sirius, what are you doing?"

"Talking to Harry..."

"What? How? You know you're not supposed to--"

"I know, I know..." It was Sirius' turn to become irritated. His frown grew deeper and Harry glimpsed Lupin sitting next to him on the bed. "I gave this to him for emergencies—Snape has stopped giving him lessons, can you believe that?"

"He stopped?" Lupin snapped, taking the mirror from Sirius' hands. "He cannot simply stop giving Harry--!"

"Guys!" Harry groaned. "I don't care about the stupid lessons! Professor Lupin, Snape is a Death Eater—he's a traitor!"

"Harry, however you feel about Professor Snape, you must try to get along with him," Lupin said patiently before Sirius interjected.

"No, Harry is right, Remus. He saw a memory in Dumbledore's pensieve that proves it."

"Yeah, and then he threw me out." Harry added.

Both Sirius and Lupin shoved their faces into the tiny surface of the mirror. "He caught you?" Sirius demanded.

"Yeah..." Harry's heartbeat sped up—he hadn't meant to reveal that part. "I-I was kind of...I wasn't supposed to be looking, but I just had to find out about...and he caught me but I don't think he knows--"

Harry sat for another three or four minutes listening to Sirius and Lupin chastise him about sticking his nose in things that were none of

his business. Lupin went on about how dangerous it was for him to do such a thing, how if Snape really were a Death Eater he could've simply killed Harry or Obliviated him. In fact, they seemed to latch onto this theory as a means to dispute his claims. Harry protested stubbornly, but Lupin insisted that he listen to 'reason'.

"Think about it, Harry—it's more probable that he was only furious at you for eavesdropping. Though, I don't care how mad he was; he had no right to stop giving you lessons. I'll have to try and contact Dumbledore..."

"While you're at it, can you tell him that Snape is selling him out?" said Harry hotly.

"Harry..." Sirius looked as if he believed his godson, but Lupin spoke up again firmly.

"I promise you, we will investigate this. I will speak with Snape myself."

"Don't do that, he'll know it was me who told you everything and then maybe he really will try to Oblivate me!" Harry said automatically before he realized that maybe he wanted Snape to know it was him. He wanted the traitor to know who blew his lies out of the water when he was finally confronted...

"No, no, I'll speak with him about your lessons. I know it's been hard, Harry, but those lessons are very important."

Harry did not feel reassured—in fact, he felt worse than he had before he thought of the mirror. If Snape continued to give him lessons, he would more than likely continue softening him up for Voldemort. This was the opposite of what Harry had in mind. "Listen, can you look into what I saw first, at least?" he asked them both beseechingly.

Lupin and Sirius exchanged glances, but nodded. "Of course. I'll check it out. In the mean time, do not contact Sirius again—I'll contact you. And practice your Occlumency, Harry."

"Fine...fine..." Sirius muttered instead of Harry. He looked as disgruntled as Harry felt at the mention of not being contacted through the mirror again. "Deprive me of my only link to the outside--"

"Sirius, we will not discuss this again right now..."

Harry felt he ought to defend his godfather, but just then someone knocked on his door and Ginny's faint voice called, "Harry? Are you in there?"

"I gotta go, Ginny's here."

"I'll be in touch, Harry," Remus nodded grimly. "And remember, don't do anything until I can get to the bottom of this..."

"Sure." Harry watched the image of their faces fade (Sirius looking upset), and put the mirror carefully back into his trunk under a pile of his underwear. He closed the trunk and got to his feet when Ginny knocked again. "Yeah I'm here, come in Ginny."

Unable to help himself from imagining the argument that was surely going on now between Lupin and Sirius, Harry ran a hand through his hair and sat down cross-legged on his bed as Ginny came in, looking excited and upset at the same time.

"You've been up here this whole time?" she asked, her eyes wide with surprise.

Harry shrugged. "Yeah...why?"

"Well, didn't you hear all the noise?" Ginny came further in and sat herself down next to him. He could see the skin on her cheeks was flushed, as if she had run all the way up here.

He frowned at her. "What noise?"

"Umbridge screaming, fireworks going off...Fred and George leaving the school forever...that sort of thing?"

"I was kind of preoccupied..." Harry started dimly before pausing and squinting at her in disbelief. "I'm sorry, what was that last bit? Fred and George doing what?"

Angelina paced alone in her dorm; having walked up to the Tower numbly after Fred and George took off.

She just couldn't believe it.

Why hadn't they told her they were leaving?

After practically spending every day for six and a half school terms together, they at least owed her the courtesy of letting her know they would be going away, right? Right? "Damn right!" she muttered to herself angrily. Angelina hadn't spoken to anyone—Ron and Hermione kept trying to guess exactly when the twins decided to do this, but she could only walk along blankly. She just couldn't believe she would never again have to put up with Fred making faces at her while they were trying to study; never again laugh fit to burst at some funny thing George whispered in her ear during Dumbledore's speeches; never again settle herself between the two boys at the Gryffindor table or pass them in the halls, or watch them hustle their fellow students into buying some knew invention of theirs.

After all the stuff that had happened—this notion depressed Angelina more than anything else could have.

...she still had Harry. And she loved him, but he was no Fred and George. Angelina fancied she might like to sleep in his bed tonight—she didn't think she would be able to contain herself once the shock fully wore off. She would want to talk about how she was feeling (abandoned, left out, scorned even?), and she knew Harry would listen to her. He was very good at that when he wanted to be.

Settling herself down on the side of her bed, she reached over and retrieved the whistle Fred had given her when she found out she would become Quidditch captain from the night stand. She turned it over in her hands, feeling an overwhelming desire to cry. Stupid gits...they'd better not show their faces around here again, because if they do I'm gonna--!

“Oi, Angelina!”

There was a sharp knock on her window, and Angelina’s head jerked up to see Fred’s freckled face hovering outside. He grinned and gestured for her to come to him. Angelina felt all traces of anger towards him vanish and she jumped up from the bed, whistle in hand, to hurry over and open the window. “Fred!”

“Shhh!” he shushed her as she unlatched the lock and threw open the windows eagerly. “We came back to--!” He couldn’t get the rest out; for she’d wrapped his neck in her arms tightly and squeezed.

“Oh you came back!”

“Yeah...yeah...” Fred coughed, wavering a bit on his broom as she tried to pull him in closer to hug him more. “Okay, that’s...I can’t breathe Angie...”

“Sorry...” Reluctantly she released him, positively flushed with happiness to see them again. Fred was hovering in front of George, who was keeping a lookout but grinning just like his brother. “Are you gonna come in?”

“Yeah, sure, for a bit.” Angelina helped them both climb through her window and they both propped their brooms against her bed before allowing her to hug them simultaneously. They exchanged semi-amused looks and patted her back before she released them. She stood smiling for a second, and then punched Fred hard in the arm. “Ow! Bollocks, woman, what’d ya do that for?”

“How dare you try to leave without saying goodbye, you big arse!” Angelina hissed at him as he rubbed his arm gingerly. She felt her eyes and nose burn with tears.

“We’re here, aren’t we?” George spoke up, dodging her blows until she landed one in his chest. “And we—ow, ow, that hurt Angie--!” She didn’t stop hitting them, slapping their faces and smacking their heads and punching their arms until they both grabbed hold of her fists. “Would you give that a rest?”

She glowered at them, but nodded begrudgingly that she would stop. Once they were convinced, they let her go.

"That's better...Merlin I feel sorry for Potter..." Angelina made to stamp on Fred's foot, but he jumped out of the way, laughing. "Sorry, it needed to be said!"

"It's not funny!" Angelina shook her head at them both and folded her arms. "You have no idea how I felt when I saw you two take off."

"Happy for us, I hope..." George said, smiling whimsically.

Angelina sighed. "Well...sure of course I'm happy for you. Your own shop, that's great. But..." she trailed off, her heart swelling with nostalgia. "I'm really going to miss you."

"We'll miss you, too, Angelface." Fred reached out and took her in his long arms. He held her tight, kissing her on the forehead. "But we couldn't stay here, you know that. Things were finally put into perspective for us."

"You can come and see us any old time you want, you know," George added, rubbing her shoulder. Angelina felt a warm tear slide down her cheek. She nodded against Fred's jumper. "We're in Diagon Alley, and the best part is there's a pub above our shop!"

"Oh dear god, Merlin help us..." Angelina rolled her eyes and laughed half-heartedly. "I guess you're right—you guys are too brilliant to suffer through the mess Umbridge has made of this school." She stood up straight and wiped her face, sighing shakily "I just wish I could go with you."

"Nah," they said in unison. George reached over to pick up his broom, and her heart gave a lurch—they were leaving her again, this time for good. "You've got friends here..."

Fred picked up his broom, too. Angelina's eyes welled up. "You've got Harry..." he said as the two of them backed up again towards her open windows.

"You've got Quidditch..." George gestured to the whistle she still had clutched in her hand.

A gust of cool wind blew in, and their hair flew around for a split second, making them look as boyish and whimsical as ever she'd seen them. She was struck with the memory of her first encounter with them. They plopped themselves down in front of her, moments after being sorted, their red hair in their eyes, grinning like the little troublemakers they were.

Hi, I'm Fred, one said. And I'm George, said the other one. Last name's Weasley but we ain't nothing like our brother, they told her in unison as Dumbledore was getting up to speak. What's your name, then? She told them. Angelina? Angelface, Fred asked George. Naw, Angie, George told Fred. Which one do you like better? Oh that's Dumbledore, he's wicked cool...old, though...

"You're gonna ace your N.E.W.T. and become some super Auror or something," Fred was saying to her now as George threw a leg over the windowsill. "And we'll have a drink in that pub this summer."

"Okay..." Angelina took hold of Fred's hand before he could climb over. He turned to look at her. They stared at each other for a moment, and she whispered: "I love you, you lanky sod..."

"Love you too, Angelina." They embraced a final time and then he was off behind his brother. "Tell Harry he'd better come by the shop!" And they were gone—flying off into the distance for the second time that night.

Chapter Thirty-Six: The Downfall of Delores Umbridge

Two days.

That was the extent of Delores Umbridge's time as Headmistress of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry.

These days were not, as she had so been expecting, full of the kind of gratification, respect, and sense of accomplishment that should have come with finally achieving her biggest goal. The first sure sign of the troubles that would plague the new Headmistress was the unyielding denial of entry to the Head's office.

"Gargoyle, a new password will be instated immediately," she sang to the stone beast guarding her new base of operations. "Now if you'll please..." and she tapped it twice with her wand, uttered her new password, and waited for it to spring to life and move aside—but it did not. It stood quite still, as lifeless and immobile as you please, staring straight ahead. Umbridge tapped the gargoyle again and said her password, but to no avail.

She was alone in the corridor, but she looked from side to side as though looking for a sign that someone was witnessing this besides her. What a night she'd had—nearly having her reputation ruined by Potter's lies, nearly seeing everything she'd worked for come toppling down on her carefully styled head. She did not desire any more mishaps, but it seemed that desire would be denied, along with her entry to her own office.

It was hers, wasn't it? Well yes! Even though Minister Fudge had been disappointed by her outburst and had stridently admonished her for her behavior, he had granted her the position. He had signed the decree, hadn't he? Yes, yes...sure he told her that she would be monitored, that the scrutiny of both the Ministry and the entire wizarding community would befall her...but the position was given to her nonetheless, and it was a result of both her hard work and his trust in her.

Potter had nearly ruined it for her with his accusations...but thankfully things took a different turn. True—it had been Potter she'd been

trying to get rid of, but Dumbledore taking the blame for the boy suited her just fine. She hadn't expected to reach this point so soon. She'd just have to come up with another way to silence Harry—she just had to be patient.

This proved challenging. And it started with that damned gargoyle.

She tried the last password Dumbledore had given it, her plump face flushed with impatience. "Fizzing Whizbee?"

Still...the damned thing would not budge.

Umbridge felt her patience shrinking, and as she opened her mouth to speak, it moved suddenly; its menacing iron face shifted down until its pupil-less eyes were looking into hers, and the mouth opened. "The entrance is barred—it is sealed." The voice was like bricks running over concrete, and it scared her, but more than that it made her angry. "Until the rightful Headmaster returns, the entrance is barred—it is sealed..."

She stamped her foot.

"What do you mean? I am the rightful Headmistress! I have here a decree stating clearly--!"

"The entrance is barred...it is sealed...until the rightful--"

Umbridge felt herself losing control as it continued repeating that stupid mantra that Dumbledore no doubt bewitched it to declare in his absence. She let out an angry little shriek and aimed her wand, tapping it over and over again and gritting her own password—but no use, it just kept saying "...it is barred...it is sealed..." until she wanted to scream.

"FILCH!" she screeched, not caring where he was, just that he come before she tried to disintegrate the bloody thing.

He had been lurking around a corner, and he came limping over as fast as his old bones could carry him. "I heard you calling, ma'am!"

“...it is barred...it is sealed...until the rightful Headmaster returns...”

“Can you do something to shut this thing up?”

“Er—n-not presently, ma’am...I ain’t never heard it say nothing like that before...” Filch frowned at it dimly, running his hands together as if nervous that she would berate him for being useless to her. “You could try putting a Silencer on it, could you?”

“Oh that won’t do at all, Filch,” she snapped, shooing him aside and raising her wand. “Finite!”

The gargoyle growled roughly and went immobile again, its head moving back up to stare down the hallway. Umbridge rubbed her temples and took a deep breath. After a few moments of waiting to make sure it wouldn’t speak again, she cleared her throat and said evenly: “As I said before, I am the Headmistress now. Delores Umbridge, got that?”

The gargoyle sat silent.

“Good. Now the new password...” and she tried her password again.

Nothing. Stillness. Silence.

Needless to say, since then everything Delores experienced as headmistress was steeped in unpleasantness.

Oh, those abominable Weasley twins—first defacing her decrees with such vile insults of her personal character all over the school so that she was unable to even walk down the halls without snickering children all around her muttering “ministry scum!”, or “puff patrol!”, or some other nasty thing under their breaths. Even the teachers’ mouths twitched with restrained laughter when she sat in on their classes; it was insufferable! Filch was so damned slow and even for a Squib he was infuriatingly incompetent, so when it came to undoing the rapidly-spreading graffiti she was left entirely on her own. She instructed him to find the culprits and detain them to face her good judgment, but of course he couldn’t pull that off, either.

Then the fireworks, Merlin curse them both!

She had been foolish enough to think that her humiliation would end with a few dozen decrees ruined, but of course leave it to those little brutes to take it a step further! The giant, glittering, cartoon-like likeness to her that they'd set off months before had been bad enough, but to have the halls of her school teeming with the things and her not being able to do a damn thing about it nearly sent her over the edge. If she could just get her hands on them! She would let Filch skin them alive if he wished, no one had to know...but they slipped through her fingers yet again, after she thought she'd finally caught them.

Delores stalked back to her office at the end of the day feeling enraged and put upon. She felt utterly sick with failure—only her first day as the new headmistress and already she'd lost her office, been called 'ministry scum' by virtually every student at Hogwarts, and let two of the biggest trouble makers in the school fly off and escape punishment.

If it had not been for the soft knock at her door; the sudden presence of one of her allies; she would have called Fudge and told him to find another stooge.

But at that first day's end, Umbridge found herself in the company of one Severus Snape, and he had good news. Yes...good news indeed. "I have finished the Veritaserum..." he uttered, his black robes draping him in shadow as he stood in her doorway holding a small, gleaming vial.

"Snape!" she whispered with relief. "Oh you clever man, you! This news hasn't come a moment too soon!"

"I'll leave it with you, then." He walked into her office and handed it to her. She held it in her chubby hands; her eyes alight with malice. There was one thing she could do to make them all see she was a force to be reckoned with. Harry Potter would go down, and he would bring Dumbledore down with him. He would tell her where Dumbledore had gone, he would tell her where Sirius Black was

hiding, and he would tell her what he had been doing with those other students for all those months in the Room of Requirement.

Her plan was perfect—she would get him to sign a confession, in his own writing, and it would be sent to the minister as soon as the serum wore off. She knew that little liar was keeping these secrets, she knew that there was something dark and unnatural inside of him—the legend of his defeat of the Dark Lord brought about questions that needed answers. The answer was in Harry Potter; the answer was in what she saw in her office weeks ago.

“Just three drops, eh, Snape? That hardly sounds like enough for someone as deceitful as Potter...”

As she stared at the vial, the contents of it glittering pristinely in the light from the lamp on her desk, she pictured the look on Potter’s face when he went into his dark ritual. So rudely interrupting her while she was trying to counsel him; so eerily sitting there with his eyes fixed on hers. He had not really acted; he had not really said or done anything...it was simply his eyes, and that face.

“May I ask...what do you hope to get out of him?”

Delores had only seen artists’ renderings of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and they were all done after his rise as the darkest and one of the most powerful wizards in their world. By then he no longer looked human—by then he had the legendary face of a humanoid snake, and the infamous red eyes. She had only ever seen one photo of the dark wizard before he became what he became; the photo of him as a boy. His neat black hair, his pale skin. The only telltale sign of him even being the same person was that icy, dark stare.

This face was the face Delores saw in Harry Potter on the night of his last detention with her.

He stared at her; he looked into her and found the only part of her that housed fear. He seized this fear like a freezing hand wrapped round her heart and he drew it out. She gasped, feeling a chill ripple through her whole body. Was it Potter looking at her? Or someone else? She felt he could see everything—inside her mind, where all

her plans lay; that dementor attack, her scheming with Malfoy, her jealousy of Dumbledore...he did all this with something as simple as a look.

It was not Harry Potter looking at her. It was--“Professor Umbridge?”

She looked up from the vial, suddenly aware that she had begun to perspire a little. “Yes, what is it?”

“Potter—what information are you trying to draw out of him?”

Umbridge stood and turned her back on Snape, depositing the vial inside her pink teapot, before smoothing the front of her robes and giving him a thin smile. “That’s confidential, Professor,” she explained sweetly. “But rest assured the Ministry thanks you for your assistance...and your discretion.”

“I wasn’t aware the Ministry condoned the use of truth serum on underage wizards...”

“Good night, Severus.”

He crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow at her. “A request, first, if you’ll allow.”

Umbridge’s smile grew wider; of course he would try to gain a favor in exchange for his services and his silence. She had been prepared to deal with such a request, and so she answered, “Go on...”

“Draco Malfoy will need to be treated for...an illness. I shall need to pull him from some of his classes from time to time until he has recovered.”

It was Delores’ turn to raise a curious eyebrow. “An illness, you say? What’s wrong with him?”

“That’s confidential, Professor...” Snape said coolly, using her own words on her. “His father would like me to be...discrete...and if you don’t mind I’d rather not involve anyone else.”

"Well..." Umbridge took a tight little breath and nodded, simply happy to have the serum in her possession. "As long as you don't keep him away from his studies too often, I don't see a problem with it. Lucius Malfoy has trusted this school with his son's wellbeing, and who am I to deny the child a speedy recovery?"

Severus nodded curtly and swept out again, leaving her with her thoughts. She began to look forward to the rest of her years as Headmistress of Hogwarts. She sat at her desk for perhaps another hour, daydreaming of finally turning the school around—finally seeing all those misbehaving students get their dues and finally seeing Harry Potter exposed for the wretch he really was.

The Veritaserum was the key to all of that.

Of course, by the second day's end, Delores Umbridge was no longer Headmistress of Hogwarts. And it was a pair of Extendable Ears (available in Diagon Alley at Weasley's Wizard Wheezes for only five Sickles!) that would be her downfall.

Harry came to regret ignoring Lupin's advice not to tell anyone else about Snape.

He found himself going over the details of the memory with Hermione, Ron, Ginny, and Angelina a hundred times. He found himself answering the same questions over and over again. And of course, no one was more inquisitive (that is to say, bloody annoying) than Hermione.

"Hermione—" Harry began during breakfast, chewing his corn flakes and rolling his eyes, "—I've told you a hundred times already, this was not a dream. This was real; it was one of Snape's memories, and if you don't believe me--"

"I do believe you, Harry." Hermione sighed deeply and buttered her toast. She bit into it harshly, obviously upset. "But you're not listening to me. We know Snape works for the Order as a spy--"

"No, he works for the Death Eaters as a spy!" Ron interjected, jabbing a forkful of scrambled eggs into the air.

Harry nodded his agreement with Ron, chewing his cereal angrily, as Hermione gave them both looks of exasperation. She looked to Angelina for a little help, but the older girl merely shrugged, not having come to a conclusion on any of it. Hermione swallowed her toast and went on. "Let's just focus on the facts, then."

Harry put his spoon down and watched as she began to count off her fingers.

"Snape was instructed by Dumbledore to teach you Occlumency."

"Yeah...so?" Angelina rubbed his shoulder and he conceded, pushing his bowl away and crossing his arms. "Go on..."

Hermione licked her lips and continued. The sun streaked over her shoulder and warmed Harry's face as she spoke—the quiet buzz of sleepy, eating students cushioned her words as the five friends huddled together in the center of the Gryffindor table. The teachers sat at the staff table talking amongst themselves, as usual, though not one of them spoke to Umbridge. She sat in Dumbledore's place, eating her porridge in silence, her beady eyes surveying the Great Hall imperially. Though, anyone who cared to notice would see that those eyes lingered at the center of the Gryffindor table, on five little heads in particular.

"And did you or did you not actually manage to occlude yourself during the last lesson?"

"I..." Harry opened his mouth, closed it, and then snorted. "Yeahr I did."

"So—if he was doing his best not to teach it to you, why do you think you were able to do that?" Hermione blinked at him expectantly, and the knowing look in her big brown eyes annoyed him to no end.

"I dunno...because I'm not an idiot, like everyone here seems to think..." Harry replied bitterly.

Angelina nudged him on the thigh.

"No one thinks you're an idiot."

Harry begged to differ, but he didn't receive a chance to retort, because Ginny piped up, making one of Hermione's next points for her. "And didn't you say that Snape hadn't reported Dumbledore leaving the school to anyone? That's why that Bellatrix woman was so angry with him, wasn't it?"

Harry shifted uneasily on the bench next to Angelina. "Well, yeah, but--"

"And," Hermione continued once Ginny turned to her again, "didn't you say that he told them about the connection after Bellatrix admitted Voldemort already knew about Professor Dumbledore?"

"Yes, but--!" hissed Harry, really becoming agitated now.

"So think about it, Harry..." Hermione leaned in, locking eyes with him beseechingly, "...if you were being backed into a corner by people that you need to trust you—we're talking your life depended on it, not to mention the lives of others—wouldn't you do the same thing?"

"Do what?" Harry uncrossed his arms defiantly, sitting up straight and glaring at her. "You're defending what he did? Hermione—he mocked Dumbledore! Snape might as well have spit in his face, he gave away everything--!"

"But, Harry there was nothing he could do. He had to tell them something; Voldemort--!" Ron shushed her and Hermione lowered her voice, leaning in closer, her face twisted in frustration. "Voldemort already knew about Dumbledore, Harry. That means his connection is even stronger than we thought—and all the while you're pushing everybody away, you're letting him get closer! You're letting him in!"

"But Snape--!"

"Harry..." Angelina spoke up, now, though she didn't raise her voice in exasperation like Hermione. She took his hand and he looked over at her. She was calm, and her deep brown eyes were filled with

concern. She sighed. "I don't think any of us are trying to tell you that you're wrong about Snape."

"Well, actually, I--" Hermione started, but Angelina silenced her with a flicker of her eyes. Ron put his hand on Hermione's to stay her, and the bushy-haired girl clamped her mouth shut with some difficulty. Harry shook his head, a little saddened by her lack of loyalty.

Angelina waited until he turned to her again before she said anything else.

"What we want you to understand, though, is that Snape doesn't matter."

"Angelina..."

"He doesn't, Harry. Neither does Malfoy or Umbridge, or anyone else. What the real thing is—the thing we should be truly scared of, the thing Dumbledore stressed was absolutely the most important thing above all..." She looked up to his scar and back. "Harry you've got to protect yourself from Voldemort. That means protecting your mind..."

"Who'll teach me now? I can't go back to Snape," he whispered, suddenly afraid Voldemort was watching them all right now, through his own green eyes. "I can't..."

Hermione touched him lightly on the shoulder and he turned to her.
"We will."

"What?"

"We'll teach you, all of us. We'll help you figure it out."

"Yeah, but Hermione you don't know Legilimency."

Hermione smiled a little, scratching her chin. "Well, true, but...at least we can help you try to close your mind at night before you sleep. We'll do that meditation thing you taught in the D.A."

"Yeah, mate," Ron added as Angelina leaned in and kissed Harry on the jaw. "I'll even stay up with you till you think you've got it, if you want."

"Thanks..." muttered Harry, still feeling a lingering desire to argue his case about Snape some more. "I guess it's worth a try."

"There have got to be books in the library on Occlumency and Legilimency," Hermione was saying, more to herself than to anyone. She let go of Ron's hand and began to gather her things. "I think I'll just pop by before Charms and take a quick look, shall I?"

"I'll go with you, Hermione," offered Ginny, and the two girls stood up from the table.

"Er—sure." Harry finally smiled, amused as Hermione gave Ron a peck on the cheek and hurried away, their argument seemingly forgotten. "Your girlfriend is a piece of work, Ron."

"No bloody kidding." Ron shook his head and shoved cold egg into his mouth, swallowing it down along with a few gulps of milk. "But for what it's worth, I agree with you about Snape. He's a nasty liar."

"Thank you!" Harry exclaimed before punching Ron in the arm. "Why didn't you—!" he punched the ginger-haired boy again. "—say anything, you twit?"

"Ow...listen mate, when Hermione gets going, nothing we say matters, you sawr'it for yourself, didn't ya?"

Harry sighed and nodded, unable to help himself from turning to look up at the staff table. Snape was chewing slowly, watching Professor Flitwick summon a scone from one of the platters at the end of the table. His eyes soon landed on Harry's, however. The boy and the man stared at each other with the utmost contempt—Snape no doubt furious over being discovered, and Harry fuming over not being taken seriously. Harry wondered, what are you gonna do, you sneaky bastard? Obliviate me while I'm asleep? Or try to kill me? His thoughts were interrupted by Angelina's voice.

“Professor Lupin said he would look into it for you?”

“Yeah...” Harry reluctantly tore his eyes away from Snape and turned to her. “But I don’t think he believes me any more than Hermione does.”

“I think you did the right thing telling him.” She offered a smile. “If Snape is a traitor, he’ll find out and tell Dumbledore. You can’t fix everything by yourself, Harry. Some things are out of your control.”

“I know.” They kissed. Ron groaned and tapped his fork against his goblet.

“Yeah, well, not to interrupt your snog or anything, but we’ve got another problem.”

Harry frowned. “What?”

Ron gestured to the staff table again. Hagrid was standing up, getting ready to leave so he could set things up for the day’s first class. He looked awful. Even worse than the last time Harry had seen him; which, he realized, was ages ago—he’d been so preoccupied with everything that he’d actually forgotten all about Firenze’s warning. Not surprisingly, as the large caretaker stood up, Harry saw Umbridge look over at him with no small amount of discomfort.

“She’s gonna sack him, sure as she’s sitting there...”

Ron and Angelina nodded their agreement as they watched Hagrid make his way towards them. “Poor Hagrid,” Angelina muttered.

The three of them waved at him sadly as he approached, and he tried to smile at them even though his face was swollen and purple. He raised one big, bandaged hand and returned their greeting. “All righ’, you three?”

“Hagrid,” Harry piped up despite himself, “what happened to you?”

"What are ya talkin' about Harry?" Hagrid stopped in front of them, trying his best to appear nonchalant—he looked like he was in pain, though. "I'm fine."

"No...you look like you got into a fight with a giant," said Ron around a mouthful of bacon.

"Who told you that?" Hagrid started, his swollen eyes darting around as if making sure no one else had heard.

"Told me what?" asked Ron, swallowing down his bacon. "Did you get into a fight with a--?"

"Now, listen you three, just never mind it, that's all. I'm fine, I've just been gettin' me hands dirty with some of the beasts in the forest. The Centaurs have it out fer me, all because of Firenze..."

"Hagrid is that all?" Harry didn't really believe him. He had seen what the other Centaurs had done to Firenze, but he couldn't picture Hagrid getting his face pounded in willingly on a daily basis. Why would he subject himself to that? Love of magical creatures or no, Hagrid wasn't that thick. Was he...?

"I've got a class to get ready for, and you three might like to do the same. I can handle myself, all right?"

He didn't wait for them to protest, instead turning and taking his long strides towards the entrance hall, leaving them staring after him. "He's lying, right?" Ron asked as they prepared to leave for Charms.

"Of course..." Angelina answered. She gave Harry a kiss and waved she'd see them later. Harry, while waiting for Ron to finish off his orange juice, watched her go. He stared at her swinging ponytail and felt so glad they were all right again. Just as Ron was setting his empty goblet down on the table, the murmur of conversation all around them was pierced with an ear-splitting shriek.

"PEEVES!"

Every pair of eyes turned to stare at the staff table, where Headmistress Umbridge was jumping up from her seat, her head having been doused in lumpy porridge. Peeves the poltergeist was floating in big circles above her, giggling madly and dangling the porridge pot like a prize. “Ha, ha, you can’t catch me, Ministry Scum Umbridge! Hee,hee,hee heeee!”

Umbridge screeched bloody murder and aimed spells at him, which he dodged, rocketing all around the Great Hall with the pot swinging from his chubby, translucent hands. The teachers sitting at the staff table looked at Umbridge indifferently, some even lazily calling for Peeves to at least bring the pot back so the elves wouldn’t lose it, but for the most part continued eating their breakfast as if nothing had happened.

Harry and Ron couldn’t suppress their laughter, and neither could any of the other kids.

“Ministry scum, ministry scum!” Peeves sang, giggling as he picked up Ron’s egg platter and tossed it at the Slytherin table. Several Slytherins stopped laughing and shook their fists angrily at him as the egg caught them about the faces and landed wetly on their robes. “Umbridge, Umbridge—ministry scuum!”

Umbridge continued firing spells at him, her face beet red and sopping with the clumps of porridge sliding down her cheeks and the bridge of her nose into her bosom.

“Boy, I guess Peeves really took what my brothers said seriously!” Ron mused as the two boys made their way out of the Great Hall.

“What did they say?” Harry asked, grinning.

“They told him to give her hell for them.” Ron shrugged. “I guess he respected them enough to actually do what they said.”

“Well, if it involves making trouble, then I’ll bet even Hermione could tell him what to do.”

They looked at each other and both decided: “Nah...”

There was an odd mixture of serious thought and extreme amusement that followed Harry that day.

He went over and over his choices where Snape and everything else was concerned, but also he found this process interrupted by the wonderful torture of Headmistress Umbridge on only her second day in the job.

Peeves had indeed taken the twins' request to heart, and he harassed her non-stop. Harry saw her rushing from classroom to classroom as he walked the halls; her face red with breathlessness, her hair a mess, her wand drawn. Teachers sent for her, despite being able to handle Peeves themselves, when the ghost clapped the erasers together over their classrooms; when he unscrewed the chandelier on the first floor (Harry could've sworn he saw McGonagall tell him which was the right way to twist the bolts); when he smashed up Snape's potions supplies, smeared ink all over the Slytherin flag in the Great Hall, wrote profanities all over the mirrors in the girls' washrooms, and on and on.

"Maybe, in a couple of weeks, she won't be able to take any more, and she'll just quit..." Ron whispered with an amused smile on his face as they tried to avoid being bitten by the Fanged Geranium plants they were attempting to feed.

Harry snorted and snatched his fingers away from his own plant before it could do damage. "Yeah, if we're lucky."

"Have you noticed..." Hermione had finished feeding hers, and was now cleaning its leaves expertly. She frowned and nodded towards the Slytherin side of the greenhouse, towards the end where Malfoy and his friends usually stood. "...Malfoy has been missing some of his classes?"

Harry looked up to where she was staring; his own brow creased as he watched Pansy being nipped at by her plant. He rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to the Geranium. "He's probably off being 'cured' by Snape."

He honestly did not wish to discuss it. It hardly seemed fair that he should get to miss class after class undergoing whatever treatment Snape was giving him for a little torture and a little poisoning. He deserved what he got, Harry thought bitterly, starting on cleaning the plant's leaves, though finding it rather more difficult than Hermione seemed to.

"I found some books," Hermione perked up as they were making their way from the greenhouses after the lesson. "And actually, I came across that one I lent to Angelina before—I know it's primarily about Memory Charms, but there's some really interesting stuff in there about Occlumency as well."

"Great..." Harry attempted an enthusiastic smile, but for some reason couldn't muster very much excitement. They trudged up the path to the castle as a strong breeze rustled their hair, and Harry watched his shoes take step after step. He could not help wondering what would happen to him—what he would be able to do, if he let the power take over. If he let...no, that was a bad idea...if he let whatever was happening to him continue, he would be letting Voldemort in. That could not happen.

But...could he perhaps learn Occlumency, shut Voldemort out, and still be able to tap into this thing inside him? Harry wasn't a stellar student; he realized this. But he had magical capability beyond what everyone assumed—it had been confirmed by no less than McGonagall and Dumbledore. Hell, even Snape was in awe of him...and he's trying to get me killed for it, Harry thought.

"Harry what's in the bean?" Ron asked, and Harry saw in their faint shadows that Ron's head was turning slightly to regard him. He didn't look up from his shoes, however.

Harry shrugged. "I'm on the fence."

"How could you possibly be on the fence about this?" Hermione cut in before Ron could respond.

"I-I'm just not sure I want my ability, or whatever it is, to completely go away." He gestured with his hand, feeling that old inability to articulate his feelings properly take over again.

"Well...it's risky..." Hermione frowned. "The way I see it, there are two choices..." she lowered her voice as they entered the castle, "...one--you let us help you learn Occlumency, or two--you wake up one morning with red eyes and scaly skin."

"Thanks for putting that into perspective for me, Hermione," Harry muttered sarcastically. "You're shaping up to be more annoying than Snape."

Hermione rolled her eyes but smiled apologetically as they turned to enter the Great Hall. "Sorry. I'm just trying to--"

"Help, I know," Harry finished, sighing heavily. "I appreciate it, really. We'll start reading those books tonight after dinner, all right?"

"Sure..."

Harry was just about to settle himself in his usual spot, his eyes scanning the Great Hall for sign of Angelina, when Filch limped up to him from behind and tapped him roughly on the shoulder. Harry made a face at Hermione and turned around. "Huh?"

"Headmistress wants to see ya in her office, Potter," Filch rasped, sucking his teeth. Acting on instinct, Harry found his eyes traveling up to the staff table. McGonagall was speaking to Hagrid, grimacing at his appearance and shaking her head. Hagrid looked really nervous, and as she was shaking he was nodding, his eyes fixed to his large bowl of soup. He couldn't stand there all day, Filch's arms were already shaking with impatience and he rasped, "Move it along, boy."

Harry attempted to pass meaningful looks along to Ron and Hermione. Ron looked confused and Hermione tilted her head, her eyes going wide. She mouthed 'what does she want?' but Harry had to move along with Filch close on his heels.

He walked through the Great Hall again, searching out Angelina. He didn't spot her before they went through the large doors, and his heart rate sped up nervously. Harry flexed his hands, his palms becoming slick. He tried to walk as slowly as he dared—he did not want to go up and see Umbridge without someone on his side knowing about it.

He thought he was out of luck a second before he finally saw Angelina coming towards him with Katie and Alicia on either side of her. She was maybe five steps away, pausing in her conversation with Katie, her brow furrowed as she watched Harry and Filch approaching. Harry stared directly into her eyes with as much meaning as he could and said loudly: "Um, what does Professor Umbridge want to see me about, Mr. Filch?"

Filch grumbled and poked him forward with a hard, boney finger. "Just mind your steps Potter, you'll find out soon enough."

Harry ignored the rickety caretaker's wheeze of malevolent laughter and kept his eyes on Angelina's until they passed each other. She looked as if she understood what he'd been trying to convey. She understood...right? He really hoped she understood...

Angelina had been divulging to Katie Bell that for a young chap Harry was a deliciously good kisser, when she saw him coming out of the Great Hall with Filch.

She stopped mid-sentence, instantly realizing what was happening by the look on Harry's face. Filch prodded him forward, grinning in the way he always did when a student was about to get into serious trouble. She remembered what McGonagall had told them the night Dumbledore left. Harry needn't have looked at her so; she knew what to do immediately and when they passed each other she muttered to Katie and Alicia that she had to do something and headed straight for Ron and Hermione.

"Hey—what did Filch want?" she interrupted them.

"He took Harry to see Umbridge, why?" Ron answered through a mouthful of meatloaf. Angelina guessed that Harry hadn't told them

about McGonagall's speech, but she didn't waste time trying to explain. She turned to Hermione as Ron gulped down the food.

"I need you to do me a favor."

Hermione frowned but lowered her spoon from her mouth attentively.
"Sure..."

"I need to find out what Umbridge wants with Harry." She knelt down behind Ron, lowering her voice urgently. "You and Ron have to help. We need to think of a way to listen in on what they're saying. Can we use Harry's cloak? Do you know where he keeps it, Ron?"

"Do you think she's going to do something? Expel him?"

Angelina shook her head, glancing up at the staff table to search out McGonagall. "I don't know, but we have to find out and tell McGonagall. She said if Umbridge tries anything else to tell her—I think Umbridge is still gunning for Harry, especially with Dumbledore out."

"And she's probably got a nasty temper on, what with Fred and George humiliating her," Hermione added. "I'll bet she's even more determined now."

"Extendible ears..." Ron muttered quietly. Both Angelina and Hermione turned to face him. He pushed his plate away and leaned closer, dropping his voice down to a whisper. "George gave me an extra pair...we could use those."

"Good. Get them and meet me in that corridor around from Umbridge's office in five minutes." Angelina stood up from the table and hurried to fetch Professor McGonagall. Ron and Hermione exchanged looks for a split second before springing to action, both of them abandoning their food and gathering their things.

Ginny and Dean stopped their chat to watch them go. "Hey, what's--?"

"Explain it later," Ron answered over his shoulder. Of course, Ginny did not heed this. She pecked Dean on the cheek and hurried along to follow them.

Angelina approached the staff table quickly, ignoring the curious gazes she received from the teachers; especially Snape. McGonagall looked as if she were giving poor Hagrid a grueling admonishment, but when Angelina approached she stopped talking abruptly, turning to gaze at the girl with a raised eyebrow. "What is it, Angelina?"

Angelina looked sideways at Snape before speaking carefully. "May I ask for a moment, Professor? I-I just have something I wanted to run by you...about the match and all."

McGonagall stared at her for a beat, her thin lips tightening and her brow creasing, before nodding and gesturing to the small corridor off to the side of the staff table. "In there," she stood up and pushed her chair back. "I shall speak with you again later, Hagrid."

"Course, Professor..." mumbled Hagrid, too lost in his own woes to notice Angelina's peculiar behavior.

Snape watched Angelina and McGonagall stonily as they made their way past the dining teachers and slipped into the corridor. Once inside, the older witch closed the door to the buzz for a quiet atmosphere so they could speak softly. "What's happened?"

Angelina whispered urgently, feeling they were running out of time. They were missing something, she was sure of it. She simply had a feeling; a very bad feeling, and Harry obviously shared it judging by the look on his face when they passed each other. "Umbridge pulled Harry up to her office. I know it isn't anything solid, but he wanted me to tell you, you should have seen his face--"

"He's up there now?"

"Yes, ma'am."

McGonagall's eyes narrowed past Angelina thoughtfully for a split second before she nodded sharply. "You did the right thing by coming

to me. I've had a feeling after yesterday..." the older woman paused, and Angelina held her breath. After a second, McGonagall began to move past the girl in the opposite direction of the Great Hall. "I need to do something first, but I'll be up there as soon as I can." Her back was already to Angelina and she was walking briskly; determined.

"But--?"

"Keep watch and don't let yourself be seen," was all the Transfiguration teacher relayed over her shoulder as she disappeared quickly into another doorway down the hall. Angelina did as she was told, turning and running back out into the Great Hall. She walked quickly past the long tables full of students, out into the entrance hall, and broke into a sprint up the marble stairs where she would meet Ron and Hermione near Umbridge's office.

Harry felt the seconds ticking by lethally as he followed Filch up to Umbridge's office.

He knew that there was no plan to follow; no surefire way to catch Umbridge at her worst for whatever she was about to do to him, but he hoped with every step he took that something could be done. The feeling of dread increased as they drew nearer their destination. He was not afraid of her. He was not intimidated by her—he loathed her and what he really wanted was for her not to exist, not to be there, not to have come to Hogwarts at all. Be gone, you evil bitch, Harry thought, heart-a-pounding as they reached her door.

Filch knocked twice hard, and a sing-song voice called: "Come in..."

The door opened and Umbridge was sitting at her desk, a satisfied smile planted on her plump face, writing some notes on a scroll of parchment. Harry thought silently as he was pushed inside by Filch that she was probably writing another decree celebrating the banishment of Harry Potter the Liar. Filch did a pitiful little bow. "Potter to see ye, Ma'am."

"Please sit down, Potter. Take his wand, will you?"

Harry begrudgingly gave up his wand to Filch, who snatched it and smiled crookedly at Umbridge.

"Thank you Filch." She did not look up from her parchment as Filch stooped again and shuffled out.

Harry sat down in one of the armchairs across from her, listening to her clock ticking along with the faint scratching of her quill against the parchment. They sat there like this for a long time it seemed, or it was simply that Harry could not stand being in the same room with her. The kittens rolled around but he was oblivious to them, having seen them many times before. He tried to read what was on the scroll, but she finished and snatched it off the desk just as his eyes fell on it. Harry watched her roll it up neatly and deposit it in one of the drawers. Then, pausing to smile at him sweetly, she pulled her wand out and conjured two steaming cups of tea.

"Drink, Potter?" she purred, batting her eyelashes at him. The evil pits in her beady eyes were aglow—he knew he couldn't trust her.

"No, thanks," he croaked, adjusting himself in the chair. "I'd rather just get this over with and go back to dinner, if it's all the same to you."

Umbridge bristled at his tone, but her smile remained. She made a soft 'tut, tut' sound with her tongue and pushed one of the cups of tea his way. "Your rudeness never ceases to amaze me, Mister Potter. Yet I'm prepared to be the bigger person—I wasn't asking. Have some tea." She inched it further towards him.

Frowning, Harry eyed the teacup warily before he reached out and picked it up. "Fine."

"Milk? Sugar?"

"No thanks."

"Oh have some sugar, Potter. Young boys like a little something sweet now and again, don't they?" Umbridge took his cup again and stood up from the desk; turning away from him. Harry watched as she made a little show out of adding sugar to his tea, his suspicions rising

considerably. Where the hell is Angelina...? Umbridge turned back and handed him the cup again, sighing with satisfaction and taking her seat. She picked up her own teacup and leaned back lavishly, the smile of all things evil still firmly set. Harry watched her sip with her eyes still on him. She gestured with her cup to his own expectantly. "You're not drinking, Mister Potter. Remember what I said about rudeness? I will not tolerate it."

"What do you want with me exactly?"

"What?" She blinked at him, her smile slipping a little. "'What do you want with me,' what?"

Harry fought the urge to roll his eyes at her. "What do you want with me, Professor Umbridge?"

"That's better." Umbridge set her tea down and leaned forward again, clasping her hands across the surface of the desk. "Oh just a chat—but first drink up, drink up!"

Harry knew that he should not drink anything she offered him—this was one of the lessons the fake Mad-Eye Moody taught him the previous year. Imposter or not, it was good advise. He had about two seconds to make a decision. She expected him to drink it...he could see in her gaze...she was willing him to drink it with all her might. Harry winced as the hot liquid neared his lips, and boldly he took a sip. He tasted tea, nothing else. He put the cup back on the desk and her smile grew wider.

Harry sat still, waiting.

"That wasn't so bad, was it? It's a shame you think so little of me that we can't even have tea together Potter..." He said nothing. She paused, and then quite abruptly asked, "Where is Albus Dumbledore?"

Harry blinked, realizing why she wanted him to drink so badly. "What?"

"Have another sip of tea..."

“No thanks...”

Very suddenly, Delores dropped all pretence; she drew her wand and pointed it at him. “That was not a request, Potter.”

“You’re joking.” Harry stared at the wand, and his eyes flickered back up to her face. She was quite serious. Her smile had disappeared and was now replaced by cold determination. Harry’s heart rate sped up; blood pumping anger and exasperation through him slowly. “What did you put in that tea?” He knew the answer already, but he had to hear her say it.

“Drink it. All of it.” She brandished the wand at him, standing up to glare down at him cruelly.

“No!” Harry stood up from the armchair defiantly, glaring right back.

He expected her to yell at him or try to grab him or something, but she did not lose her cool. Umbridge smirked and raised her wand to his face. “Let me remind you of something, Mister Potter: I am in control here. Now, kindly take your seat and drink that tea.”

She flicked her wand and he heard the lock on the door go click softly.

He balled up his fits, very sure that she had put Veritaserum in the tea and was not going to let him leave until he drank all of it. Judging from her first question, she thought he knew where Dumbledore was. He wasn’t very worried about the old headmaster, though—he thought of Sirius; of the Order. His eyes flickering to her aimed wand briefly, Harry breathed through his nostrils, feeling his cheeks burning. He shook his head stiffly.

“No.”

“You think I’m playing games with you, you evil little boy?”

“I’m not as evil as you are!” spat Harry, despite himself. He had to stall her, no matter what the consequences. Angelina was coming

with McGonagall...she was coming...she had to be. "Hanging out with Death Eaters!"

To his utter surprise, Umbridge threw her head back and laughed at him. He had never heard her laugh this way—she cackled evilly before landing her maniacal gaze back on the fifth year boy. "Are you referring to that pile of lies you put in that filthy paper of Lovegood's? What wizard in his right mind would believe that rubbish?"

"Plenty..." breathed Harry, really understanding that this woman was insane.

"Lucius Malfoy is no more a Death Eater than I am, boy."

"But he did help you send those dementors after me," came Harry's calculated reply. The last little puff of steam evaporated from the cooling tea sitting between them as the office fell silent again. "What kind of wizard would send those things after a kid and a Muggle?"

He seemed to throw her off with this question, and she faltered, blinking at him. Her plump bosom rose and fell with her agitation. Umbridge still held the wand aimed at him but she seemed to be thinking...

"I did what I had to do..."

"Sure you did. But what I don't understand is why."

"Someone had to do something!"

He was getting to her; he could tell. He pressed his luck further, swallowing and shaking his head. "Do something about what? Me? All I did was tell the truth--!"

"No one wants to hear the truth Potter!" Harry stopped mid-sentence and gaped at her. She looked positively incensed, but he did not care as long as she forgot about that tea. "Can't you get that through your thick little skull? Why...to continue saying that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has returned to power...to spread that kind of fear into people's minds...it's...it-it's simply impossible!"

"It's not impossible--that's what you and Fudge aren't getting. Stop being so afraid and face the fact that Voldemort is back, and he's going to start another war!"

At this, she smiled again. She was switching back and forward from old, syrupy sweet Umbridge to crazy witch-lady so quickly that he was finding it hard to tell which side of her would emerge next. He simply stood there, wandless, trying to stall for time until someone came to witness this spectacular scene. "Oh, and you'll know all about that, would you Potter?"

He hesitated, but wisely answered: "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh-ho, look who's denying things now!" She clucked her tongue at him contemptuously. "You certainly do make a fuss about the Death Eaters and You-Know-Who, but I wonder...what I saw during that debacle in the Head's office....and what you did here..."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't try to deny it, Potter. Even without the Veritaserum, I know you're lying. You know what I'm talking about..."

Harry panicked slightly at the mention of the serum, but stood his ground. "I don't."

"In my office...mere weeks ago...you sat there in that chair...and you changed."

"I...I what?"

"You changed, Potter," breathed the scheming teacher quietly, as if remembering the fright she felt during that experience quite vividly. "You changed into him. Into V-V..." she couldn't say it without shivering, and the look in her eyes drove a cold spike down Harry's spine.

He swallowed, listening carefully. He had not been able to remember what happened during his detention with her that night. Indeed, before he even had a chance to sit down and really think about it, he was rudely interrupted by the news of Malfoy and Angelina's kiss on Valentine's Day. After that...after that he had almost killed the other boy. Something Hermione said to him was floating around in the back of his mind, hidden in darkness. He couldn't remember it exactly, but Umbridge's story seemed too authentic to ignore. He narrowed his eyes at her as she continued.

"Voldemort!" she whispered, so low he could barely hear her. It was as if she were afraid that saying it too loudly would cause him to materialize or appear behind Harry's eyes again. Her wand hand began to shake, and she was completely lost in her own memory. "I've never seen him in person, oh Merlin, no...not until I saw the look in your eyes that night..."

"Professor? Are you...are you all right?" Harry didn't particularly care for her wellbeing, but she was looking at him and the look was more than a look—she was becoming more afraid the more she spoke. It wasn't even as if she were really looking at Harry, but at some image of a Harry/Voldemort hybrid beast she'd conjured in her brain. She stared at him—Harry did not like the way she was looking at him at all.

"You saw me—you saw into me. You saw that I was afraid of you and you took that fear and made it cold, and you twisted it cruelly...those eyes..."

"Professor Umbridge, I really don't know what you mean..." Harry knew what she meant. He had experienced a gaze with such a powerful effect before, in the cemetery the night Voldemort came back. The night Cedric Diggory died. "But I would really appreciate it if you'd lower your wand."

She shook her head suddenly, as though clearing it of all traces of fear, and jerked her wand in his face again. "Nice try, Potter...but I'm afraid we have unfinished business. Now you pick up that teacup and you drink every drop."

"What do you want from me?"

"I want to know exactly how much you know, Potter. About all the nasty little secrets you've been keeping. I want to know what you know about that dementor attack—I thought I covered my tracks well but I see you pose a threat not only to the innocent witches and wizards you've terrorized with your truth-telling--" she spat out this word as if it tasted rotten, "--but also to me and the things I'm trying to accomplish."

"You're cracked," said Harry bitterly.

"Maybe, but soon I'll be rid of you!" she sang, gesturing to the teacup. "Once you've spilled your little guts, you're going to sign a confession and you're going to be Obliviated. You won't remember any of this, Potter."

Harry scowled at her, really wishing he had his wand. He was sorely tempted to start his meditation—perhaps that would scare her into letting him go, but he did not wish for Voldemort to appear. And, if one listened to Umbridge tell it, this was a very good possibility.

"The tea, Potter."

Harry had to resist. "Sod off!" And he reached out with a quick hand, knocking the teacup over onto the desk. The contents spilled out all over her parchment and quills, and she shrieked angrily, poking him in the shoulder with her wand.

"You little--!" her face turned red as a tomato. Harry rightly guessed, from the way she was gawking at the spilled tea, that she put all the serum she had into that cup. "Urghhh, Potter that is the last straw!"

"Let me the hell out of here, you crazy--!" Harry demanded, turning and trying the door. She scooted her fat arse around the desk quickly and pushed in front of him, blocking his way with her hefty bosom.

"I have more than one way of getting the truth out of you..." she whispered nastily. She backed him up towards the desk. He watched her eyes...they were aglow again with that evilness he knew so well. She didn't seem so afraid of him now. "My patience with you has run

out, boy. You are a threat to everything I have worked for, and I cannot have you ruin it! You'll tell me...you'll confess..."

He noticed her moving her wand tip from point to point on his body, as if...as if trying to figure out which part she wanted to...

"Whatever you're thinking," he breathed, his bum now pressed against the edge of her desk. "You'll be in big trouble if--"

"What the Minister doesn't know won't kill him. I am doing this for the greater good, not just for myself. It'll be the Cruciatus for you, Potter."

"No!"

"CRUC--!"

BANG!

Umbridge screamed as her door blew off its hinges and shattered to pieces all over her and Harry. She tried to cover herself with her arms, leaning against him—pushing him onto the soaked desk. He shoved her away with his palms and scrambled over the desk just as Minerva McGonagall flew into the room, her face contorted with so much rage that Harry half-expected her to start beating Umbridge over the head. "Delores Umbridge you step away from that boy now or so help me I will blast you into oblivion!"

Umbridge righted herself hastily and tried to adopt that smile of hers, but McGonagall would have none of it. "Minerva?! What on earth are you--?"

"Drop your wand," uttered McGonagall through clenched teeth, her eyes ablaze with fury behind her spectacles. Harry never felt so glad to see this woman in his life. His heart thumped painfully in his chest. The seat of his pants were damp from the tea...he didn't give a damn. He only knew one thing: Umbridge was caught.

"Minerva," Umbridge began shakily, trying to adopt an air of authority in her voice. "I demand to know what you are doing--!"

"I could ask you the same question, Delores..." came a very sad, very numb voice. Harry's eyes flew from McGonagall to the door, where Minister Fudge was now standing. He almost leapt up and whooped in triumph. Fudge was holding something thin, something long, something flesh-colored in his hands. Fred and George's Extendible Ears...

Umbridge looked from Fudge to Minerva to Potter and back. She was trapped—like a fat little dear—she had nowhere to go but down.

"M-Minister, I can explain!"

"Oh...and I'll want to hear it, Delores," said Fudge dejectedly. "But first I'm afraid you're going to have to drop your wand, as Professor McGonagall has instructed."

"You're going to Azkaban, Delores," declared McGonagall, her eyes flashing triumphantly. "You can damned well explain all you want when you're in shackles. Dawlish, leave the children and come in please!"

Harry watched as the very same Auror who tried to take out Professor Dumbledore came in, followed closely by Ron and Angelina. Harry wanted to go to them immediately, but he was across the room. The three of them stared at each other, grins on their faces as broad as Umbridge's rump. Dawlish took out his wand and gestured for her to come to him.

Harry should have been paying attention, because instead of going quietly, she lunged straight for him and seized him by his throat. Her grip was tight, and for a split second he saw stars, but then someone shouted angrily and she was immediately hit with a Stunning spell that made her drop heavily to her knees and fall over sideways onto her back.

Harry grimaced, rubbing his throat, as Angelina rushed into his arms, stepping over Umbridge on the floor.

They embraced tightly before Fudge said quietly: "Dawlish, take her away..." Harry had no sympathy for the git. If he had listened all

along he wouldn't be in this mess. "Charge her with conspiracy, harm to underage wizards, and attempted use of the Unforgivable Cruciatu..."

Dawlish nodded and hoisted a dazed Delores up to her feet. He dragged her over to her fireplace, took out some floo powder from his robes, and dropped it, saying clearly: "Azkaban Prison."

Fudge looked at Harry for a moment, anger and defeat clear in his lined face. "Happy now, Potter." This was not a question. Harry said nothing. "Minerva, let's go down to your office to discuss the...well...to discuss the now vacant Head and Defense posts."

"Filch will escort you, Minister. I'll see to the children first."

"Fine." Cornelius slumped out of the office, leaving them alone.

"Thank you, Professor..." Harry muttered, grinning. He held onto Angelina with a loose arm, but lifted the other at his Transfiguration professor. She blinked at him impassively for a moment before taking his hand. They shook.

"Thank Angelina," she told him. "If she had not acted quickly, that crazy woman would have tried to kill you next, I'm sure of it. Get to bed, all of you. You've had enough excitement for one night."

Harry nodded his agreement as McGonagall swept out of the office. Hermione and Ginny came in after her, joining Ron. No one said anything. They all just stood there smiling, happy that at last Hogwarts was free from the tyranny of Delores Umbridge.

Ding dong, the mean old witch is dead.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: What Must Be Done

There was a celebration that night in Gryffindor Tower.

And, of course, Harry found himself retelling the story--minus a few details--of Umbridge's demise. The excitement, the uproar, the utter relief that everyone felt was extremely palpable. It started with the five friends as they walked back noisily from Umbridge's office. Harry was grinning from ear to ear, as was Ron. He held onto Angelina's hand tightly—he knew she had been instrumental in tonight's victory from the very moment he saw her come into the office. He felt nearly filled with a kind of warm, vibrating energy and he could not stop shaking his head in disbelief. Umbridge was history—Fudge had heard everything she'd been saying; she had confessed to sending those dementors after him. She had implicated Lucius Malfoy, and the look on Fudge's face!

Ron shook Harry vigorously by the shoulders, his freckled face flushed with triumph as they walked. Everyone was talking at once—students in the halls gave them curious looks and Ron acted on pure, happy instinct.

"UMBIDGE BIT THE DUST!"

"Shush, Ron..." Hermione attempted to calm him, but quirked an eyebrow at herself as she must've realized, who bloody cared how loud they were? "I mean...he's right! Umbridge is gone, everyone! Hey--!"

Harry watched in amazement as Ginny and Hermione followed Ron's lead, walking up to kids on their way to their common rooms to catch curfew, spreading the good news. Kids everywhere looked at them in disbelief, but by the time they made it back up to the Tower the word was spreading fast—Umbridge had attacked Harry, the Minister of Magic saw it all, and Umbridge was on her way to Azkaban.

Harry's warm excitement developed quickly into burning, rolling restlessness. He held onto Angelina's hand, talking and walking at the same time: "Yeahr it's true...yeah...she did...She's gone, for good, I gotta--we gotta get to...I'll tell you about it later..." and on like

that until they were finally standing in front of the fat lady's portrait. He had been actually pulling Angelina, who was also trying to answer questions as they went along.

They left Ron, Hermione, and Ginny out in the halls behind them still telling anybody they saw about Umbridge.

"Harry, slow down will y--?" Angelina attempted as he dragged her through the portrait hole. She had a kind of half-smile, half-worried expression on her beautiful face as he pulled her tight against him. Harry just looked at her. They were standing just near the portrait hole; he couldn't wait until they got any further into the room. He felt his arousal attack him ferociously, and he kissed her.

She moaned throatily as his tongue slid into her mouth and he pressed his jaw as far as it would go against hers, trying to kiss her as deeply as possible. He rocked her back and forth, squeezing her body against his, breathing in the smell of her.

He loved her...he was young and there were many things Harry was unsure of, but this feeling had come to be the only consistency in his life.

When he let her go they only had about a split second to look into each other's eyes before their friends burst in, leading a dozen other Gryffindors behind them in some sort of rowdy march of victory.

"UMBRIDGE--BIT THE--DU-UST!" They sang, ala-conga line, whooping and cheering and shaking Harry cheerfully.

Harry found it difficult, but he pushed down the throbbing arousal that had built within him and reluctantly let Angelina go as he was hoisted into the air and carried around the room. They sang "Umbridge Bit the Dust" loudly, waking the other Gryffindors. Soon the whole common room was full of kids, just like the night Dumbledore left, only the vibe was completely opposite from that time. The only negative thing about it was the absence of Fred and George.

"I can't believe those arses left yesterday—if they'd have just waited!" Seamus guffawed, shaking his head. No one dwelled, though;

Hermione pointed out that Fred and George probably would have left anyway—they had their shop and didn't like school much even before Umbridge came along.

Everyone was awake. No one had any plans to go to sleep any time soon.

Harry chose the opportunity to make eye contact with Angelina again...his restlessness giving way to an intense pressure in a place that could embarrass him if he stayed where he was. By this time Ron was bragging about how the Extendable Ears were his idea, and everyone laughed at the irony that it had been one of the twin's inventions that had done Umbridge in. Harry stood up casually, feigning a yawn. Angelina saw him getting up, and she followed him with her eyes as he backed up carefully towards the stairs leading up to the boys' dormitories. He was two or three steps up when he saw her rising from her seat as well, and he turned quickly before anyone could call to him or notice he was leaving their midst.

He soon felt her hands grabbing onto his shirt and the belt of his pants at his rear, and he grinned, whispering "Shhh...!"

They closed the door behind them softly, Angelina bidding it locked with her wand, and Harry backed her up towards his bed with his hands roaming. He felt empowered somehow—and though now he merely chalked it up to their feat tonight, later he would come to question why he felt so predatory at this moment. There was love and there was passion within him for her, but as his eyes took in her body a carnal instinct seized him and he whispered hoarsely, "Take these off..."

She stared into his eyes and her features became relaxed with an un-Angelina-like demureness coupled with her apparent desire for him. He watched, a knot in his throat the size of a Snitch, as she moved her thighs together from her sitting position on the edge of his bed while she slid her underwear off. The smooth milk chocolate skin covering her long, lean limbs was so absolutely mesmerizing to him and she breathed, "Harry..." biting her lower lip. "I want you inside me."

Harry smiled devilishly, driven to the breaking point of excitement by her bold talk. She had not talked to him like that before—he liked it. A lot. Harry took off his school shirt and the undershirt beneath, tossing them to the side heavily. She did the same, and then watched as he took off his shoes and pants until he was clad only in his boxer shorts, a pronounced erection peeking out at her from underneath the cotton fabric. Angelina rubbed her thighs together again in anticipation, feeling warm and damp between her legs; feeling excited by her own behavior and her extreme attraction to him.

She expected him to come to her immediately once most of their clothes were gone, but he stood staring at her for a beat, his mouth opening and closing as he switched from breathing through it and his nostrils heavily. She tilted her head at him, sensing that he wanted something but was loath to ask for it. He reached out his hand and took hold of her fingers softly.

Slowly, Harry brought her hand closer to him, and lightly touched them to the beginnings of his raven happy trail. Angelina let out a small gasp, leaning forward slightly, understanding instantly what he wanted. She removed her hand from his, causing a split second of uncertainty to spur in him before she brought her other hand up and took hold of the top of his shorts. Harry let her pull the shorts down in one smooth motion. Her fingertips on his skin sent little zings of electric stimulation through him; her eyes on his hard cock made every nerve laced within it stand at attention. She ran her index finger softly along the shaft, looking up at him fleetingly for his reaction.

Harry breathed through his nostrils, burning up, wanting her to, wanting her to...her fingertip brushed the moist tip and he felt a mad quivering inside.

Angelina had never touched a boy the way she was touching Harry. It was a true testament to how much closer they'd become when he was willing to allow himself to ask for what he truly wanted from her and she was willing to give it to him without hesitation. She enjoyed the feel of him beneath her fingers, and the way he swayed to her touch as she began to use her hand a little more. Angelina felt herself being attacked by her own quivering desire as she stroked him and as his face began to change.

She began to not just stroke him but caress and pull gently. Harry moaned very quietly and she continued, her eyes moving from his face to what she held in her hands as she explored the results of her efforts. She felt it stiffen and then quiver again, and Harry made a louder noise—she knew she was doing these things right.

“How is that?” she whispered.

“That feels...really...good. Don’t stop.”

Almost unaware of himself, for her hands felt so good on him—her gentle coaxing of his sensitive flesh so blissful—Harry reached out again and stroked the side of her face. She breathed on him. Warm breath touched his curly black trail as he laced his fingers into her hair. He could feel the pressure steadily moving up his shaft with each stroke of her hand, and Harry wanted it to come so badly, the release...it was so close inside him that every breath he let escape was rigid with anticipation.

He pulled her face ever forward, his eyes closed, only telling by the distance of the breath on him until he felt her mouth brush against him. Angelina paused, and Harry opened his eyes to see when he looked down at her that she was parting those full lips of hers.

Seconds later Harry had to close his eyes again, for the very exquisite feeling of her warm, damp mouth enveloping his throbbing member almost made him lose himself—he exhaled and fought to control it. He could feel the release fighting to come, but he wanted this sensation to last as long as possible. She moaned deep within her throat as she took him in, and he felt the vibration in his pelvis.

“Angel...” he whispered to the quiet room, lost in that feeling.

Everything disappeared as he let it wash over him and the pressure rolled all through him before it began to press painfully into that one, narrow area being pulled in and out of Angelina’s beautiful mouth. Silky, wet, rolling stimulation from her tongue and the hard pull of her mouth repeated over and over again...it built up, up, up; pain and pleasure mixing together until it burst apart as Harry felt himself cum,

only vaguely worried about where the fluid would go, and when it had passed he felt lightheaded but extremely satisfied.

He grinned at her, coming back into his own awkward senses, but found her with an odd look on her face. His grin faltered as he realized that he had emptied himself in her mouth. "Holy shit...I'm sorry..." he whispered with more regret than he actually felt as he watched Angelina shake her head and swallow with some amount of effort. When he saw the tiny rise in her throat move down, he felt himself becoming aroused again, and when she licked her lips slowly with her eyes burning he leaned into her and kissed her with renewed passion from the common room earlier.

Angelina let loose a sultry laugh as he climbed onto the bed with her, hungry for him now...

Harry took hold of her arse possessively and brought her closer to him, sitting on his haunches so that she had to open her legs and wrap them around him. Her long, coffee-brown torso sloped elegantly down to her curvy backside, which rested in his hands. Harry took in deep breaths as he concentrated on her body. Very quickly he became fully erect again as she leaned into him, her head above his by an inch, her hair framing her face in the dark.

"I love you Harry...oh I love you..." she whispered, breasts brushing against his collarbone as she looked down into his eyes.

"Say that again," he muttered, pushing the head of his cock into her so she squeezed her eyes shut and whimpered wantonly.

"I love you."

He thrust himself further inside, feeling her hands in his hair, feeling his spine curve as he inched closer and drove deeper. "Urgmmm, say it again!"

"I love you...!" She gasped as she began to squirm around on top of him, lifting herself up and coming down again, sliding her hot, slick nether-lips along his shaft with slowly gathering momentum. Harry sat back, fascinated, as Angelina closed her eyes and arched her back,

her hair falling over her shoulders and hanging loose behind her so that the tips brushed the knuckles of his hands gripping her ass. She pumped up and down, moaning and grunting and leaving him breathless as she used him to pleasure herself, and he could only watch and elate in the exquisite friction her movements caused.

Then Harry shifted and moved her onto her back, sinking himself as deep as he could go inside her before he lifted out and came down again hard. She loved this—he had paid attention the last time—and the shuddering “...hmmm...ohhh...” she uttered confirmed it. He did it several more times just to hear her make that noise, feeling wicked and in control again. Faintly, he could hear the other kids down in the common room laughing and talking, but he tuned them out, only vaguely willing them to continue celebrating the night away as he and Angelina engaged in their most exciting session of love-making yet. There was no uncertainty surfacing to make him uneasy or hesitant anymore; all Harry wanted right now was to keep going...keep slamming his cock inside her and sliding it out again where the swoop of pleasure hit him in wave upon delicious wave. She felt so good inside...

He moved faster and faster as her moans grew more intense—he paused as his curiosity peeked, readjusted her leg, and then slowed down. Harry watched her face, reveling in the movements of her lips and the twitching pleasure showing in her features. Occasionally she opened her eyes and stared at him, making him feel even more powerful and exploratory...making him want to find more ways to please her. She smiled softly and reached out for him, and he nestled himself between her legs, adopting a slower, deeper, more steady rhythm that she seemed happy with. He could not stop studying her in between trying to keep himself from succumbing to how good she felt inside. They kissed softly and held each other close...he drove himself in to her with the care and desire of a man, not a boy. The small pockets of air between their rubbing, touching bodies grew humid from their love-making...and after a long, seemingly limitless rhythm of firm pushes of himself into her he began to hit a particularly sensitive spot deep inside...then Angelina dug her fingernails into his back and moaned breathlessly: “...oh yessss...Harry keep going...mmmm...!” and he kept on. Her noises grew louder and out of control; her breathing more erratic; the wetness into which his

member delved doubled as she scratched him and writhed and blew her hot breath through her tender lips as if she were on fire seconds before he felt her climax, and she brought him with her.

When they lay still enough to catch their breath, Harry rolled over onto his stomach and closed his eyes, feeling all the tension leave him.

There were a few minutes in which the only sound was their soft breathing and the cheerful voices below. Harry drifted off for a while until Angelina spoke. "I don't know how I feel about the fact that getting rid of Umbridge made you horny..."

He felt a bubble of hoarse laughter rise up in his throat and he let it out, rolling over to seize her. They laughed and kissed, Harry's cheeks burning and Angelina's heart light. "Never mention me, Umbridge, and the word 'horny' in the same sentence, love..." chuckled her boyfriend with his green eyes shining.

"I'm not complaining, mind..." she leaned over and gave him a kiss on the lips while he lay there on his back, playing with her hair lazily. "But it does make me wonder if I should be prepared for you to be in the mood if--" Harry made a 'don't say it' face at her but she grinned and continued, "--they haul Snape off to Azkaban next."

Harry seized her and began to tickle her, feigning a look of annoyance through his grin. "Very funny. And what after that? I'm sorry but I don't get aroused unless something bad happens to one of my enemies...!"

"Stop it that tickles!" Angelina tried in vain to pry his hands from her waist, but to no avail.

"Sorry, Angel—no sex until Sirius' name is cleared! Or Malfoy gets expelled..."

Harry regretted mentioning the other boy. He made a face and slowly stopped his tickling, shifting on the bed uncomfortably. Angelina sensed the slight change in his mood and opened her mouth to speak

but her hearing perked up as stomping footfalls landed on the stairs and in the hallway outside the room. "Oh, I think--"

"Harry!" The knob turned and something went thud faintly against the wood as Angelina and Harry began to scramble for their clothes. "Ow...why is the door locked? Harry, are you in there?" It was Ron. "Stop wanking off and lemme in!"

"Ron, I'm not--!" Harry hastily pulled up his school trousers as he was hit in the face by the shirt Angelina chucked across the bed to him. "I'm not wanking off, you sod..."

"G-Give us a minute, will you?" Angelina called, much to Harry's chagrin. He shushed her, stifling a bit of laughter.

"Oh...Angelina's in there..." they heard someone—sounded like Neville—whisper. "Maybe we should..."

There was a fit of raucous laughter and then more pounding on the door. "Don't be embarrassed, Angelina!" Seamus? Harry rolled his eyes and grinned as he motioned for Angie, who was snapping her bra closed, to hurry up. "It's nothing we ain't seen before!"

"Oi, Seamus I'm gonna--!" Harry warned, but Angelina interrupted him, having finished dressing herself.

"All done." She unlocked the door with her wand and Ron, Seamus, and an extremely embarrassed-looking Neville came spilling in. "And by the way, Seamus," she said coolly, crossing her arms as the three of them got to their feet again. "What exactly is it you think you've seen before?"

"Eh...nothin'..." said Seamus, glancing at Harry, who was eyeing him threateningly. "I was just pokin' a bit of fun."

"Good answer," Harry admonished, shaking his head at the other boy.

"Oh man, I'm so bloody excited I think I'm gonna burst!" Ron exclaimed childishly, hopping onto Seamus' bed and jumping up and

down. "No more ruddy Umbridge! No more stupid decrees! No more boring old Defense classes--!"

"Harry we could start up the D.A. again, couldn't we?!" Angelina piped up whilst Neville and Seamus joined Ron on the bed. Harry grinned, filling from head to toe with a strong desire to go back to the worn in D.A. room.

The three boys stopped bouncing on Seamus' bed and stared at Harry with pinched anticipation clear on their faces.

"Hell yes!" Harry confirmed to cheers all around. "Are you kidding?"

"Maybe we could even get McGonagall to approve it...?"

Harry shrugged. "I dunno...would that even be up to her?"

"Come on mate, you know she's gonna take over as head of the school. It's natural selection," reasoned Ron. "She's next on the food chain from Dumbledore, everybody knows that."

"Nah, Fudge looked pissed." Harry shook his head uncertainly. "You think he'll give it to her that easily? Or would he just substitute Umbridge with someone else from the Ministry?"

"...someone worse..." finished Angelina.

Everyone let this dark cloud settle over them: the possibility that someone worse than Umbridge could be set loose upon them.

"But, hey...maybe not," Harry spoke after a long while of contemplative silence. "Maybe it'll be someone like Moody."

The mood brightened again, and as Dean was coming up to bed Ron mused: "Maybe it'll even be Moody, yeah? The real one this time!"

"Maybe what'll be the real Moody?" Dean asked, nodding to Angelina as he climbed onto his bed.

"New Defense teacher..." Neville answered.

It already being an almost nightly occurrence, none of the boys took any real notice of Angelina lingering among them. They did not roll their eyes or mutter under their breath that she would be spending the night in their friend's bed. Everyone went on about their nightly business as if she weren't there, or rather as if she was a sixth roommate—one of the boys. She draped herself in one of Harry's oversized tee-shirts, compliments of Dudley.

With excitement being so high still; the process of guessing who would become their new Defense teacher being the topic of conversation until the last sleepy suggestion was whispered to the room at large; Harry forgot to practice his Occlumency.

So it followed that he slipped comfortably into slumber with Angelina nestled warmly in his arms.

And he found the doorway, found the rooms that lay beyond it, found the huge library of dusty orbs, found that same aisle he turned down before—found Voldemort standing there at the end, waiting.

Harry stopped in his tracks, his sleeping body going rigid at the sight of him.

Voldemort stared at the boy, and smiled a slow smile with that lipless mouth of his.

I have found you, Harry...he uttered, causing Harry's blood to run cold. And now nothing can stop me—not even you this time boy.

A silent scream of anger rose up in Harry's throat and he sat straight up in bed to a quiet, dark dorm room. Cold sweat ran down his temples and his hands were shaking. His heart beat against his chest...Harry immediately looked to see that Angelina was all right. She was curled up at his side, her chest rising and falling slowly. She was fine. Though he felt it—he felt Voldemort's will latch into him. He felt she was in danger. His scar burned...it hadn't burned like this in a long while and Harry wanted to scratch at it, tear it out, get it off of him...

Voldemort had a way of scaring the hell out of people. Harry had to give the ugly fucker that much.

Cornelius Fudge sat down in Minerva McGonagall's office and sighed deeply.

He stared at his bowler hat as he moved it about slowly in his hands, truly at a loss for what to do next. He felt angry, first and foremost, but also a little bit foolish—Delores Umbridge turned out to be every bit as crazy and manipulative as he had suspected on the night of Dumbledore's escape. Would that he had only trusted his instincts then and found a way to ease her out of Hogwarts before everything blew up in his face.

Too late....too late by a long shot. He begrudgingly offered her the Head post and she greedily snatched it up. Now he was sitting here in this office, unable to deny what he heard her say to the Potter boy. Unable to deny that she was out of her mind...all that rubbish about seeing You-Know-Who through the boys eyes! And sending his own bloody dementors after Potter! Cornelius felt the most ashamed to have heard this...he had outright accused Potter of lying and had not even bothered to investigate, no...no he had listened to Umbridge and now look at him.

He would have some answering to do once word reached the papers.

Minerva came into the office, disrupting his thoughts, and closed the door behind her. He waited until she walked around to sit down behind her desk before he looked up from his hat. She held no discernable expression on her face, though her eyes were focussed and serious. He wished he could at least witness her gloating so that he could admonish it, but realized that tonight his judgment had taken such a beating that it would do little good.

"Thank you for coming, Minister," she began, drawing a look of faint surprise from him. She could tell he expected her to rub what had just occurred in his face. She had no intentions of pouring salt on his wounds, however. "I confess I didn't think you would..."

"Unlike some people choose to believe, Minerva," he answered wearily, "I do put the welfare of these children before anything. And..." he sighed and put his hat on his knee. "I did have my suspicions, you know. Her outburst in Dumbledore's office..."

Minerva raised a thin eyebrow at him. "You did—yet you appointed her Head anyway?"

"You of all people should know how these things work," he shrugged. "What choice did I have? I supported her unconditionally until then, I couldn't back out."

She seemed to agree with him, for she nodded and leaned back in her chair. With her wand, Minerva conjured two cups of hot tea, and the reference to Umbridge they offered was not lost on either of them. Fudge nodded his thanks and sipped gingerly from his cup, confident that the steaming liquid was not filled with Veritaserum.

This brought a question up, and he lowered the cup again. "Where would she have gotten Veritaserum in the first place?"

"It wasn't real serum," answered the Transfiguration professor coolly. "She commissioned Professor Snape to brew it for her some months ago. He only told me tonight because...well I'm not sure exactly why."

"So he gave her a phony supply? He didn't ask what she planned to use it for?"

Minerva sensed that Fudge was seeking someone out to place blame on besides himself—someone to indicate poor judgment in who might perhaps divert attention from the fact that he had kept the insane woman in his employ for years without noticing her tendency towards ruthlessness.

"I suspect he was waiting, Minister...seeing as how your faith in her left no room for uninformed accusations," came her even reply. Fudge frowned and took another sip of tea. "Might I make a suggestion?" she asked after a pause.

He sat up straight in his seat, sure of what she was about to ‘suggest’ and shook his head steadfastly. “Minerva, I am not releasing the warrant for Dumbledore’s arrest. He conspired to overthrow me and he was spreading nonsense about You-Know-Who to children no less...he is just as cracked up as Umbridge, and if you think I’m going to--!”

“But who shall fill the post in his absence?”

Fudge sat thinking. Who, indeed? He was sorely tempted to search the Ministry again for candidates, but he knew that would not go over well with parents after his poor judgment concerning Umbridge got out. If McGonagall was thinking the same thing, she did not give it away. She simply sipped from her tea, and it was astonishing to him that even with all of the animosity that had built between them over the issues of Dumbledore, Harry Potter, and what was best for Hogwarts, they could come to an agreement so quickly now.

“You will, of course...”

She scoffed and set her tea down on the table with force, sloshing a bit of it over the side. Perhaps not.

“It’s that easy, is it?”

“What do you mean? Isn’t that what you want?”

“Minister...you know very well what I mean. I see you have no qualms about ousting one of the finest Headmasters this school has ever seen for disagreeing with you, and you think you shall prop me up in his place to be a spokesperson for the trustworthiness of the Ministry?”

“I--!” he sputtered, trying to decide whether to become outraged or confused. “I will not have you badmouthing the Ministry, if that’s what you’re asking, of course not!”

“But I will tell the truth!”

Fudge groaned with anxiety and shook his head, standing up with his tea to move about. “Oh, Minerva, people make mistakes! Umbridge gave no indication that she would end up trying to torture a student at all before Dumbledore fled, you can’t possibly think I wanted this to happen!”

“Perhaps not, Cornelius, but you did let it happen. You were too obsessed with discrediting Potter and stifling Dumbledore, and look what it’s gotten you.”

“Don’t tell me you believe all that nonsense!”

“Cornelius...” Minerva sighed and adjusted her spectacles, looking at him as if he were a trouble-making student. He bristled at her stern expression, and almost told her the opportunity to become Headmistress had passed, but she shook her head. “I’m not telling you that.”

He raised an eyebrow suspiciously. Despite himself, he scoffed. “You mean to tell me that you do not support Dumbledore’s contention that You-Know-Who is back?”

Minerva thought carefully before answering. She was beginning to see that it was up to her, in Dumbledore’s stead, to see after Hogwarts. She hadn’t thought things would turn out this way—she had expected for Fudge to at least call the old wizard back, even if he still couldn’t be convinced about You-Know-Who. Though Umbridge’s rantings did not help their cause—she had clearly been the victim of her own staunch denial turning on her...there was just no other way to explain how she could possibly think that Potter had turned into the dark lord at any time. Oh but somewhere...in the back of her mind...Minerva found herself very concerned.

“I’m telling you that I will not be a puppet to the Ministry. If you appoint me Headmistress of this school, I will do as I see fit in order to preserve the safe learning environment that Dumbledore and others like him built,” she chose to answer, adding: “It will not fall under the same single-minded, discipline-riddled oppression Umbridge brought with her.”

Fudge thought on this, staring at his reflection in his tea for a bit, before sighing in defeat. "You think she was an oppressor, do you?"

"Minister, I believe she is out of her mind—and yes, she did do her best to make all of our lives here miserable, not just the children."

"But, what is so wrong with discipline, Minerva?"

"Nothing whatsoever—when administered by a sane person."

Despite himself, Fudge tittered under his breath and nodded his agreement. He placed his cooling tea down on her desk again and put his hands into his pockets. "Very well, then. I'll appoint you Headmistress of Hogwarts. I don't know how much my judgment is worth after tonight, but I believe despite your devotion to Dumbledore that you are a responsible administrator, Minerva."

She inclined her head in thanks. "Thank you for your trust in me. I wish you could do the same for--"

Fudge cleared his throat loudly, indicating she should not continue if she wished to keep her new title. "But I will not tolerate any more rantings about You-Know-Who, understood? If you take this post, you take it on the condition that public support of Dumbledore's claims is considered treason, and you will be punished to the full extent of the law!"

Reluctantly, she relented and clasped her hands over the surface of her desk. "Fine. Now about the Defense post."

"Yes, yes, that..." He rocked back and forth on his feet, as he was prone to when he was thinking or when excited. "Oh that...hmmm..."

"May I make a suggestion?" Fudge was somewhat nettled by her 'suggestions' but since he had no clear candidates in his mind at the moment, he nodded for her to continue. "I know a young Auror who recently graduated with top honors from her training..."

He raised his eyebrows at her. “A recent graduate? Well she can hardly be very experienced...and I must say I’m not entirely comfortable with an Auror as a Defense professor.”

“Why not?”

“Well—you know some of those decrees were given for the safety of the students, not just for Umbridge’s gain. Practical approach to defense is just too...it’s too...”

It was McGonagall’s turn to raise her eyebrows. “Practical?”

“No, that is not what I mean!” She knew that he did not like her idea because having an Auror for a defense teacher might suggest that they were preparing the students for something other than their exams. It might suggest that they were preparing the students for the possibility of another war. And to Fudge this was unacceptable.

McGonagall tried a new approach. “Minister, I’m guessing that you would not have appointed me headmistress if you did not trust me, correct?”

For what seemed like the hundredth time that night, he sighed. “Of course.”

“Then do trust me. The decision is ultimately up to me, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Fudge through clenched teeth. “But you know what kind of message that sends to--!”

“I think it would be in your best interest to let me make the decision.”

Fudge did not seem happy about this agreement any more than he seemed willing to accept what Dumbledore had been trying to tell him. His jaw set, he strode over and snatched his hat up from the seat of the chair he’d been sitting in. Putting it on, he adjusted his robes irritably. “This is only temporary, Minerva. I’ll want to see references for whomever you decide to appoint, and I will be watching you.”

“I expect nothing less,” she agreed, standing from her seat.

"Any little slip—anything out of Potter, or-or anything at all--!"

"Of course."

Still sputtering slightly, Fudge mashed his teeth and put on his hat before stepping into her fireplace. He knew that he was in a precarious position—and he knew that he had done it to himself. That did not stop him from resenting Minerva McGonagall, and it did not stop him from vowing as he threw down a handful of floo powder and shouted "Ministry of Magic!" that he would find Albus Dumbledore, charge him, and see him pay for his treason against the Ministry.

Minerva waited until Fudge was gone in a gust of green flame before she closed her eyes and sank down into her chair again, breathing a sigh of relief.

Harry had to cover his mouth in effort to stifle a huge yawn that seized him as he walked with Angelina, Ron, and Hermione into the Great Hall just before breakfast.

They were not alone—the entire school had been summoned there, led by the prefects and head boys/girls who'd gotten letters delivered by house elves at the crack of dawn. Harry had not dared to go back to sleep after his nightmare, and so he saw Dobby appear suddenly in their room to timidly deliver Ron his letter. "Blimey," Ron yawned once he'd read it. "It says we're all to be down in the Great Hall for an assembly. Bet they're gonna announce that Umbridge is gone..."

There was a similar mood to the one that spread the previous night; only this one was somewhat softer for the fact that everyone was still half-asleep. Harry listened to snatches of conversation all around him and quietly answered whatever questions were sent his way about Umbridge. He walked along, holding Angelina's hand, remembering his dream.

His dream last night and the pain in his scar following it reminded him of what Umbridge told him about his 'change' into Voldemort during his last detention. The night he went after Malfoy. It also reminded Harry of what Hermione had said that at the time he couldn't recall:

"...these dreams or visions or whatever they are...they seem dangerous to me Harry. They hurt you, and you change when you have them—you're not yourself..."

He was not himself. He was not himself...just how 'not himself' was he becoming? Merlin, could he stop it? Or was it too late? Had he allowed his stubbornness--his mistrust and animosity towards Snape--had he allowed these things to blind him to what was happening to him until he had reached the point of no return? Confusion was just one of the words to describe what swirled around in Harry's head as they took their seats at the Gryffindor table. It could not be too late, could it? Voldemort wasn't really there; he hadn't really 'found' Harry, right? Oh but...the way he felt when face to face with the dark wizard in his dream...it was just like the way Umbridge described. Voldemort saw into him, seized his innermost fears and drew them out. His worry for Sirius, his fear that this power he had discovered within himself was too dangerous for him to control...and Angelina.

Harry stole a glance at her—the warm, early morning sunlight illuminated her milky brown skin magnificently as she settled in next to him, yawning as she nodded her agreement with some thing or other Hermione was telling her.

As it had when Harry was lying next to Sirius on Christmas Eve, the feeling of dread seized him fiercely. He became keenly aware of the present—the here and now—aware of her sitting next to him talking quietly with her brown eyes shining in the sunlight. He became aware that the present would not last, and it was possible that this would be the last time he'd ever see her. All of them, as he looked from one face to the next at the table, were vulnerable around him. Because Voldemort could see them. Voldemort knew they were there...

Why did he feel this way...? Was it paranoia from the Voldemort dream...or something else?

Harry sat in silence, and Ron noticed his friend's pensiveness, but decided not to bring it up just then.

The staff table was full with all the usual teachers, minus Umbridge and McGonagall.

Harry came out of his reverie when the entire hall quieted down upon sight of Professor McGonagall emerging from the side corridor near the staff table. Everyone sat up as straight as possible, craning their necks and clamping their mouths shut as they watched her approach the podium. Despite his lingering thoughts on Voldemort and Angelina, Harry felt himself smiling as McGonagall surveyed the Great Hall in a very Dumbledore-like manner over the rims of her spectacles.

"Good morning, everyone," she began clearly, a small smile touching the corner of her thin lips. "I have assembled you here to share some important news before you begin your breakfast..."

There was a long pause, in which every kid in the place seemed to be holding his or her breath. Harry heard Ron snicker happily to himself.

"As you may have heard, Delores Umbridge is no longer headmistress of Hogwarts School..." McGonagall had not even gotten the words 'no longer' out before the whole hall erupted in cheers and stomps, and she actually broke into a full smile as she raised her hands for silence. When the noise died down (one loud "YEAH!" shouted from someone at the Ravenclaw table piercing the quiet), she continued: "...and has been detained at Azkaban Prison for charges including attempted torture, the unlawful commission of dementors, assault on an under age Muggle, and the use of truth serum on a minor. Now, a number of these crimes--these outrageous abuses of power--were committed here, under our very own roof." There was a collective gasp of excitement or horror at these words before she called for silence again.

"I do not tell you this to shock you, anger you, or scare you. I'm telling you this because I want you to remember that Albus Dumbledore held the wellbeing of his students above all—and Delores Umbridge did not. I'm telling you this because I want you to remember that Albus Dumbledore is your rightful headmaster, and even though you've been told many things about him; even though his good name has been tarnished by that woman time and again—I want you, all of you, to know that loyalty to him does not make you a traitor to the Ministry or a anything of the sort!"

This time there was no eruption of cheers, but instead a rather meaningful silence. They were absorbing her words, the lot of them (with the exception of an errant few), and she let it sink in a little before she went on.

“Now as you may have realized, with Umbridge gone there were two openings both in the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher--” cheering this time, “--and Head of Hogwarts...” Even more cheers and whoops and stomping. McGonagall smiled again. “With much consideration, and much thought put into what fares best for this school and you students, I have decided to accept the post of Headmistress--!” The cheers grew louder, with not too many scattered boos, and almost drowned her out but she went on, “This is a temporary appointment, mind you! I fully expect Professor Dumbledore’s name to be cleared and for him to be back here speaking to you at this podium in due time...”

Harry and Ron and the others clapped extra hard for this, all exchanging hopeful looks among them.

“Knew it, told ya,” Ron said to Dean above the roar, who gave him a high five. “Now onto the good stuff...”

They quieted down when McGonagall raised both hands for silence and cleared her throat.

“That leaves two things. First, the post for Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher has been filled by someone I believe to be more than efficiently qualified—some one who, I’m pleased to say, is willing to teach you the way you were meant to be taught in that subject...”

The door to the side corridor behind the staff table was opening, and everyone craned their necks to see who it was. Harry hoped it was someone he knew, someone he trusted. Someone cool, someone like Mad Eye or Lupin, or--“Who the bloody hell is that?” Ron hissed when they saw who stepped into the Great Hall, right before McGonagall announced:

“Nymphadora Tonks, if you’ll please come down.”

Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Harry all turned to gape at each other. “Tonks?” they mouthed in unison, gobsmacked.

“Who is Nymphadora Tonks?” Angelina whispered in Harry’s ear.

“Well...” Harry titled his head and squinted at the woman now descending the few steps from the corridor towards the podium. “She’s an Auror and a member of the Order...but she usually doesn’t look like that...”

“She must’ve changed her appearance to fit in for the job,” Hermione reasoned as they all watched, rapt in what was going on. Angelina looked confused, but didn’t ask any more questions, for she was just as engrossed as everyone else.

Tonks, usually in jeans and with brightly colored hair, was met with complete silence. She had changed herself to appear taller and a little older than she actually was. She wore an asphalt-colored suit and a lavender tie with a crisp gray collared shirt under her black Auror’s robes. Her shoes were shined to perfection, and they reflected the sunlight streaming in from the magicked ceiling. Her hair and face held the most dramatic changes to her appearance—her skin seemed whiter than usual (her cheeks had always held a plush, pink tinge to them, Harry remembered), and her hair was platinum blonde...a color Harry had grown to dislike over the years. It was not unattractive on her, but it did jar him—even seeing her dressed as a skinny old witch this past Christmas hadn’t affected him as much as seeing her now did.

What was more—she looked stern yet very cool; she looked sophisticated yet contemporary...Harry fancied everyone in his class (even the Slytherins, he guessed) would like her. The hair, cut into a bob that only went down to just past her jaw, hung loosely in her right eye as she inclined her head respectfully at McGonagall.

“Thank you, professor...” she uttered softly, so that the entire student body seemed to audibly strain in effort to hear.

McGonagall gestured for Tonks to take her seat at the staff table, and they all watched her move past the line of other teachers who were looking at her with just as much curiosity in their eyes. Snape eyed her disdainfully—no doubt sore that he hadn't been offered the temporary post. Harry felt satisfaction in this, though only a small poke.

Harry couldn't remember the last time such a hubbub had occurred over a new D.A.D.A. professor, with the possible exception of Moody.

"Professor Tonks will teach Defense classes for the remainder of the year—let us all welcome her and treat her with the utmost respect, shall we?" There was soft applause. McGonagall adjusted her spectacles and her smile grew wider as she concluded her speech. "The final matter I wish to mention...all decrees written by Professor Umbridge have been overturned and are no longer in effect."

This brought on the loudest eruption yet, and it went on for far longer than necessary, but none of the teachers (least of all McGonagall) seemed to mind. Seconds after she turned to take her seat, the breakfast platters appeared before them and the students dug in hungrily.

"Harry you realize what this means, right?" Ron managed through a full mouth, as usual.

Harry felt his heart soar as he nodded. "Yeah...I can play Quidditch again."

Angelina made a happy noise and kissed him on the cheek.

Hermione smiled somewhat apologetically and cleared her throat. "Um...guys...I hate to rain on your parade, but...there's only one match left, and it's tomorrow. Harry hasn't played all year."

Harry sighed, having realized that but still not appreciating Hermione for her helpful reminder. "Yeah I know. But at least I can have my broom back."

"Maybe we can take some laps around the pitch tonight, Harry." Angelina suggested. Harry brightened again and kissed her before he bit into a crispy piece of bacon.

"Yeahr okay. I've got something I want to talk about with you, anyway..."

Ron, Hermione, and Ginny looked at him curiously, but he ignored them. He wanted to talk to Angelina about his dream...and only her. It wasn't that he was ungrateful to his friends for their concern and their help...but Angelina had a way of making Harry feel reassured... This used to be Hermione's job, though she performed it somewhat harshly. And Ginny had her merits in that department, he had to admit. Though these days she seemed more independent of their group, which he didn't begrudge her, and it was just as well.

On their way out of the Great Hall, Ron nudged Harry and gestured with a raised chin to a familiar-looking blond head.

"I reckon it's only a matter of time before they arrest Malfoy's dad."

Harry nodded, staring at the back of Malfoy's head, his eyes unfocused as thoughts marched through his mind. "If they even try—Malfoy has a lot of money rolling around at the Ministry the way I heard it."

Ron snorted indignantly. "What's his money worth now when Umbridge confessed? She did say he helped her, didn't she?" Harry nodded slowly, still eyeing their enemy as they shuffled along in the queue. "Well Fudge can't ignore that...can he?"

Harry didn't answer. These days, who knew?

After another confusing Divination lesson, the boys made their way back up to the Tower for their free period, and along the way were questioned by passing D.A. members wanting to know when they could start the meetings up again. Zacharius Smith said he had a few friends who wanted to join, and Cho even approached Harry—though to his annoyance she asked if Marietta might be given a second chance after she recovered from Hermione's jinx. Harry told her as politely as he could (well, he kind of snapped at her, but she asked

for it) that there was no way he would let Marietta Edgecombe back into the D.A. “I can’t believe she asked you that,” Ron griped as they climbed the stairs to their floor. “It’s bloody amazing the way girls think sometimes...”

Harry agreed. He also agreed with Ron that it was weird how things changed so suddenly. Only three nights had passed, but Harry felt miles away from the night Dumbledore left. He remembered feeling so angry and let down that night...but now things were back to normal. It was as if none of it had ever happened—well, almost. Dumbledore was still on the run, after all.

Hermione had a stack of books waiting for them when they got back to the common room. They found a corner in the very back of the room and pulled up three chairs. Ron was picking through the titles when Hermione asked him innocently: “Ron, could you look up at me, please?” He did, somewhat confused, and she pulled out her wand, cleared her throat, and whispered: “Legilimens!”

Harry watched, bemused, as Ron’s hair rose up on his head as though filled with static electricity. He made a face and quirked an eyebrow at his girlfriend. “What are you doing?”

“Shoot.” Hermione frowned and reached out for a book, muttering, “I’m trying to probe your mind, Ron, be quiet and sit still.”

“Who said I give you permission to probe my mind?” Ron reached up and smoothed his hair down again indignantly. “That’s private, you know.”

Hermione didn’t answer him; she sat with her head buried in the book she’d opened, her wand poised and her brow furrowed. Harry watched her for a bit as Ron messed around with his hair. “Hermione—are you sure you know what you’re doing? I don’t think just anyone can learn to be a Legilimens out of one book.”

Hermione tried to carry on reading for a bit, but eventually gave in. She rolled her eyes and closed the book, tossing it on the table. “Oh, you’re right!” she exclaimed, crossing her arms huffily. “I was trying to

be optimistic before, but...it takes an extraordinary amount of concentration and skill..." He knew that she would say 'that I don't have' and it was maybe the first time he'd heard her admit that she couldn't do something. He understood she really wanted to help him; she was concerned for him and since when didn't Hermione have all the answers? But she couldn't do this. Harry knew it the moment she offered, but he had decided to let her try for her sake. They looked at each other over the pile of books and Ron sighed.

"Why does everyone look so down?" Angelina said as she appeared and pulled up a chair next to Harry.

"Hermione was trying to probe my mind but she can't," Ron offered, still touching his hair.

"Oh."

"I really can't."

"Well..." Angelina sat down. "What did you read about it?"

"Well the truth is I could only find one book with more than a paragraph or two. All the others are on Occlumency, and they all pretty much say the same thing: that Legilimency is 'the ability to extract emotions and memories from another person's mind'. Although the word literally translates as 'mind-reading', this is considered a naive interpretation of the art by its practitioners."

"Snape did go on about how the mind is a 'many-layered thing' and how it takes 'certain conditions' to perform it properly," Harry added darkly.

"'Certain conditions' meaning eye-contact?" Hermione asked him knowingly.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I think so."

"Right, I read that it's easier when the spell-caster is physically near the target, and when the target is off-guard, relaxed, or otherwise

vulnerable. Eye contact is often essential, so it's useful for a Legilimens to verbally manipulate his target into meeting his eyes."

"All the times I've ever felt like Snape knew what I was thinking, he was glaring at me right in the eyes..." muttered Harry.

"It also told about the target's emotional state—which I think means your anger, Harry," Hermione continued. "It makes it even easier when you're upset, and that's why Snape always told you to empty yourself of emotions."

"I know this already, Hermione..." Harry couldn't help feeling like he was listening to a broken record. He didn't mean to be so dismissive, but honestly he hadn't learned anything new yet in how many months of going through this stuff?

"Well what about Occlumency, then?" Ron piped up, sensing the tension between his two friends. "What did you read about that?"

Before Hermione could speak, Harry let out an exasperated grunt, suddenly becoming agitated. "What does it matter?" he snapped at no one in particular. "It's not going to make me any better at it..."

"Harry..." Hermione began, but he shook his head at her, feeling himself closing inside, feeling his anger turning bitter.

"I'm sick of this. Okay? I'm sick of all this going back and forth, guessing this and speculating that...Hermione, no matter how much you read, you're not going to make me any better at Occlumency."

"But, Harry--!"

"No. You listen to me, now, all right?" Harry could not explain why it was happening...perhaps it was that he had reached the end of his rope. How could one tell when they were on the verge of a complete shutdown? It was more than just irritation that fueled his attitude at present, though. He realized this, but he would not let them know about it. He had been thinking all morning about his dream the night before..."From now on I don't want anybody else telling me what I need to do—I know what I need to do!" His voice was rising steadily,

but Harry didn't care. He glared at them each in turn, even Angelina, though he hated the look on her face. "No more shoving books in my face Hermione! I don't want to talk about it anymore, got it?"

"Harry, she's just trying to help..." Angelina said quietly, but he shook his head again adamantly.

"I don't need your help. I'm the one this is happening to, not any of you. So let me do this on my own."

Hermione was biting her lip; he could tell she desperately wanted to say something back but he stared at her hard until she looked away. Ron just sat watching Harry with a resentful look in his blue eyes. Angelina looked...she looked like she knew what he was trying to do.

"And how will you?" she demanded.

"I don't know, but neither do any of you. We none of us know any better than the other. So I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to hear about it. I'll practice my damned Occlumency, but I'll do it alone, and don't even ask me if it's working...just be quiet about it for pity's sake..."

"Fine!" Hermione snapped, standing up with tears glistening in her eyes. "You go off and do it all by yourself, then! I have too much homework due any way, so..." she took in a shuddering breath as she gathered her books, the tears spilling down her cheeks. "I hope you're happy, I'm backing off. If anyone else needs me, I'll be in the library returning these."

Harry watched, feeling somewhat remorseful but still stubborn, as she walked quickly across the common room with her head down to avoid people seeing her cry. He looked back around to find Ron glaring at him. "What the hell is your problem, mate?" he demanded, his freckled cheeks turning red with anger. "What'd you go and yell at Hermione for? If it weren't for her--!"

"Ron, I said I don't want to talk about it anymore."

Ron stood up abruptly, throwing his bag across his shoulders. "Harry..." he began evenly, looking as if it was taking a lot of willpower to keep his voice calm, "...usually I've got your back, no matter what. But you've really done it this time. Hermione hasn't been telling you, but she is really bloody scared, all right? She can't stand the thought of You-Know...of-of V-Voldemort killing you in your sleep or something...she just wants you to be safe, that's all."

Harry opened his mouth to speak but Ron didn't wait for him to respond. He turned and ambled across the room, where he climbed through the portrait hole. Harry stared after his friend, faintly aware that his scar was stinging.

When he turned back to face Angelina, she was looking at him intensely. "I suppose you think I was too hard on her as well?" He closed his eyes as the stinging began to worsen.

"Why did you do that?" she asked him, her eyes flickering at him shrewdly. Harry reached up and rubbed his scar with his fingertips, trying in vain to message away the oncoming pain.

"Because I'm sick of--"

"You're pushing us away all of a sudden...why, Harry?"

Harry opened his eyes and let his fingers drop to the table again. He stared at her, wanting to tell her, but only feeling the slight burn under that small rise of flesh shaped like lightening. The longer he looked at her, the stranger he began to feel and this strange feeling simmered underneath the growing feelings of panic that were also there. "I can't talk about it."

"Yes you can. You can talk about it with me."

Harry felt hatred and disgust bubble up inside him abruptly, and he shook his head at her. "Could you please go away now?"

"Excuse me?"

Harry could not stop the words from escaping him, his scar burned...he glared at her as her mouth dropped open and she sat up angrily in her seat. "You heard me. Looking at you reminds me of that little rat who stuck his disgusting tongue down your throat. I don't want to look at you right now Angelina, so go."

She studied him for some seconds, and inside he wanted to apologize to her badly, but he kept his gaze chilly until she got up from her seat and walked away, following Ron and Hermione. When she had gone he bolted from the table, up the stairs, and through his door, breathing hard and feeling like utter shit. Why had he said those things? Why had he said them...? Oh no...oh no, what is happening to me? Harry looked at his hands. He did not see Voldemort's claws. He looked in the mirror on Dean's wall but only saw himself standing there. He only saw his familiar disheveled hair, his green eyes, his awkward glasses...he was Harry. He was Harry, not Voldemort! "You haven't found me..." he muttered shakily to himself. "You're a fucking liar!" Even as he shouted at his own reflection, he felt the urge and could not resist the amused snarl that escaped him.

He sat himself down right there on his haunches and closed his eyes.

Breathe. Let the stillness and the quiet come to you...

Harry spent the remainder of his break period attempting to stave off what he knew was Voldemort trying to get inside.

Harry came down, and when he was aware of his surroundings again he realized that Neville was touching him on the shoulder.

"Harry, mate...we'd better get going or we'll be late for McGonagall."

"Oh." Harry frowned, looking around the room blankly before getting to his feet again. "Thanks, Neville."

As they made their way down to Transfiguration, Neville kept glancing sideways at Harry and then quickly looking straight ahead again. Harry got the sense that the other boy wanted to ask him something, and finally when they were about ten paces away from the classroom, he stopped walking.

“What is it, then?”

Neville’s round cheeks turned bright red and he squinted at his shoes for a second while Harry looked on benignly. “Eh...well I was just wonderin’...”

“You want to know if we’re going to start up D.A. meetings again?”

Neville nodded. “Well, yeah, that. But also...”

Harry quirked an eyebrow, wondering why it always took Neville so long to express himself. “What?”

“I wanted to tell you something. I know you’ve been busy and everything, what with all that stuff goin’ on...but I haven’t really been able to tell anyone else.” He shrugged and looked away again before leaning in closer. “I’ve been doin’ that meditation stuff you taught us. Well, I-I’ve been doin’ it a lot, on me own, you know?”

“Yeah...”

“Harry, something’s happenin’ to me...I-I mean, my magic like...like it’s gettin’ bigger. Gettin’ stronger. Has it been happenin’ to you?”

Harry breathed slowly, the cogs and wheels in his head turning one click at a time. “Yes...” he breathed, suddenly seeing Neville differently. The other boy’s eyes widened in awe and excitement and he licked his lips as if he were hungry for any information Harry could provide. Harry felt the same way. “What d’you mean ‘bigger’?”

“I can’t explain it, really. I have to show you.”

“Well why didn’t you say anything before? I mean I knew you were improving, but I haven’t seen--”

“I didn’t want to...or I didn’t know how? I wanted to see if it was real. But it is! I haven’t been doing half as well in front of everybody else as I think I can.”

Harry stood thinking, and out of the corner of his eye he could see Ron and Hermione approaching. He took Neville by the shoulder and together they closed the distance to the classroom. “We should meet in the Room of Requirement tonight; just us this time.”

“What about the D.A.?” Neville asked, looking slightly confused that they weren’t waiting for Ron and Hermione.

“The D.A. can wait for another day or so...I have to show you something, too.”

Neville grinned. “All right then!”

They entered the classroom, and instead of sitting in his usual spot next to Ron, Harry sat on Neville’s other side, forcing the boy to sit between the two friends at the three-person desk. Ron didn’t look at Harry as he sat down, and it kind of pained him but he knew it was probably for the best right now. As expected, the students all settled into their seats talking loudly; everyone for some reason felt like the year had started over again—at least where authority figures were concerned. Everyone wondered what kind of mandate McGonagall would begin now that she was the Head Witch in Charge. True, she was as stern and forbidding as ever she had been but not even she could deny that she presented quite a lenient alternative to Delores Umbridge. The students felt like they could breathe again. There would be well-behaved breathing, of course...but they would no longer suffocate under Umbridge’s oppression. This was the consensus, and as McGonagall emerged from her office into the classroom, all of the Gryffindors greeted her with applause.

She nodded politely before silencing them. “Thank you, but that is enough. I don’t expect any less of you than Umbridge did...I simply won’t shove my expectations down your throats. Agreed?”

Once that was clear, they began the lesson. It was just like any lesson with McGonagall. She eyed them intensely behind her spectacles as they practiced several spells they’d need to master in order to do well on their O.W.L. exams. Harry found himself watching Neville for signs of this “bigger magic” the boy had described, but there didn’t seem to be anything out of the ordinary going on. Only

Neville seemed very focused as he practiced, getting things right after his second or third try. Harry concentrated on his work as well; more out of the need to avoid Hermione and Ron's glances than anything else. About midway through the lesson, a kid came in carrying a note for McGonagall. Upon sight of it, Harry new what it was for, and he lowered his wand as he watched McGonagall open it and read it quickly.

He thought he saw a darkness pass over her eyes for a moment, and she turned around to her desk to find a piece of parchment. He watched her write out a note of her own, and she gave it to the kid to give to whoever had contacted her. Harry thought he saw irritation set in her features; he didn't have to look to know that Malfoy was missing.

When class was over, Harry was called to McGonagall's desk.

She sat with her fingers touching her forehead in a light massage; the other hand was writing something out on a roll of parchment. She didn't look up when he approached. "Yes, professor?"

"If you want your broom back, Potter, you can come and get it this evening. I'm having Filch fetch it from the dungeons later. He's dealing with a mess Peeves made this morning at the moment."

"Oh...okay. Cheers." He hesitated, studying her as she wrote. He could tell she was angry over something. He thought he knew what. "Um...Professor McGonagall?"

"Yes?"

"H-Have you heard anything...from Lupin...about...Professor Snape?"

McGonagall looked up from her parchment finally, frowning. She raised her eyebrows at him in slight puzzlement. "Heard anything from Lupin about Professor Snape?" she repeated. "No..."

"Oh." Harry stood there for a moment, a little nettled himself. He debated on whether or not he should divulge to her what he'd told to

Lupin. He suspected neither Lupin nor Sirius would thank him for it.
“But--you know Snape stopped giving me Occlumency lessons.”

McGonagall bristled and put her quill down. “He what?”

“It was because of what...I saw...” he breathed through his nostrils, steeling himself against her somewhat hard, yet curious gaze.

“What you saw...?” Harry hesitated again and she narrowed her eyes at him. “Have out with it Potter.”

Harry swallowed; he had gotten himself to a point where he would not be able to turn back. He had to tell her now—he had brought it up and he couldn’t just play it off. So he quietly explained to her, and she listened; her eyes narrowing steadily as he spoke. He included, with some amount of burning satisfaction, a small piece of information about what Draco had done to Angelina. Harry watched her face for signs of outrage or resentment, but she sat perfectly still listening to him and there were no visible signs of either of those emotions.

“And Lupin said he would look into it, but I haven’t heard anything.”

Harry felt as if he perhaps should’ve kept his mouth shut, but McGonagall did not look like she was going to scold him. Instead she stood up and moved around the side of her desk, “Thank you, Harry. I’ll see you this evening for your broom.”

“Okay...”

She was walking out of the classroom—to go and confront Snape? His heart sped up at the thought. Would something be done, finally?

“And Remus is right—don’t tell anyone else what you told me.” McGonagall left him alone in the empty classroom staring after her. So.

Among the endless homework assignments, spells and charms to remember, and general worry over his O.W.L.’s, Harry also had three very heavy things weighing down the rest in his crowded head. A) he

had just told McGonagall about Snape and he held the faint hope that something might be done about the traitor, though this thought didn't come without a tiny amount of guilt over what Dumbledore would do if he found out Harry was trying to out his beloved Potions Master as an enemy of the Light. B) Neville's revelation to him was shocking and very intriguing to say the least. Harry deduced there was no way Neville wasn't going through the same thing that he was, but that still did not mean the other's boy's strange confession wasn't something he should take very seriously. He was excited about meeting with Neville later, and to have someone to share his own 'transformation' with other than Ron and Hermione. C) the heaviest for last...Voldemort. Harry carried the guilt of what he'd done during his break period with him all day, along with the uneasiness of anticipating Voldemort's emotions to surface at any time. His meditation had helped to ease the feelings of anger and hatred that appeared, but it did little to ease Harry's mind.

Lunch went by slowly. He ate with Neville and Seamus and Dean. The three boys talked among themselves with Harry saying little. Draco appeared for a brief moment, but then was gone as soon as he had a bite to eat. Harry did not see McGonagall or Tonks at the staff table, and Snape was not there either. Harry endured glances from Angelina and Hermione. He didn't want to not be talking to them...but he didn't want to see them hurt either. Certainty came only sporadically in Harry's life—and this was one of those occasions. He was certain that if he didn't stay away and learn to block Voldemort out on his own, something bad would happen.

It was with all these things plaguing him that he finally walked into Tonk's Defense Against the Dark Arts class, and only vaguely did he feel the excitement everyone else was clearly displaying licking at the edges of his mood.

He sat again with Neville, along with Dean and Seamus. Tonks was at the front of the classroom with her head bent over something she was reading on the desk and that shock of short blonde hair hanging in her eye. She was chewing on a quill, he noticed, and he chuckled thinking she was probably nervous.

When everyone settled down again, she stood still reading and chewing, and as the classroom grew silent Harry felt himself becoming slightly nervous for her.

A moment later she looked up from the desk finally and smiled at them all.

Harry took in her appearance up close—she looked good. Different. This was intentional, of course; the severe suite and the haircut along with her stern, older-looking face and the shined shoes did have a specific effect. He could only guess she was going for a look that would denote respect was due, but that left room for trust from her young students. Harry had at first had a hard time picturing the Tonks he had met this past summer as a professor, but this new look and her cool smile changed his mind.

“Good afternoon, you lot...” she spoke. Her voice sounded different. Could a Metaporphmagus change her voice, as well? Harry mentally told himself to read up on it when he had the time, or maybe just ask her later. It could’ve been that she simply wanted to seem older and was making her voice a little deeper on her own, without the aid of her magic. At any rate, it had a bizarre affect on him. “I guess if you didn’t already know, I’m Nymphadora Tonks. I’m your Defense teacher for the rest of the term. Everyone usually calls me Tonks, but I think you guys are supposed to call me ‘professor’.”

She surveyed them all with raised eyebrows, as if amused by their rapt silence.

After a pause, Tonks stuck her hands in her pockets; still chewing on the quill—the feather bobbed around between her lips as she spoke; and came around the desk to pace in front of the chalkboard. “So you guys have O.W.L.’s coming up, then. Boy I remember when I had those...thought I’d die from the stress.”

There was a scattering of laughter and then she clapped her hands together and grinned with the quill sticking out of the corner of her mouth.

"So I should start off by telling you a bit about myself, right? Right..." She stepped down from the small platform where her desk and the chalkboard were and walked along the aisles of desks. Harry felt good about her pausing to give him a tiny wink as she passed where he and Neville sat. "I've just been made an Auror about a year ago--"

A hand shot up at once, and it was Seamus'. Tonks had an odd smile on her face as she nodded for him to ask his question.

"Have you caught any Death Eaters yet?"

She quirked an eyebrow but shrugged. "No, not yet. Those that escaped are still on the loose." Another hand came up. This one belonged to Parvati Patil. "Yeah?"

"What kind of things do you have to do to become an Auror?"

"There's three years training you have to go through. You have tests at the end of each year, on certain skills like stealth and tracking, concealment and disguise, dueling--"

"Dueling? Really? Can you show us?"

"Er..."

"Say you're in a duel with a Death Eater—are you allowed to use the Killing Curse?"

"The Killing Curse is Unforgivable..."

Harry watched as hand after hand came up. Tonks held that ever-present look of amusement as she answered their questions. The last question was asked by Neville, and Harry actually found himself wishing he himself had asked it. "Have you heard of Meditating your Magical Center? Do you do that in Auror training?"

Tonks smiled knowingly at Neville, her eyes flickering towards Harry, before nodding. "We do learn that."

"What sort of effects does it have on your magic, then?" Neville continued, licking his lips again the same way he had when talking to Harry before McGonagall's class.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean..." Neville looked around at everyone—all eyes were on him. His cheeks pinked up but he cleared his throat and plowed on. "Does it make you faster—does it speed up your rate of magical...uh...growth I guess?"

"It is supposed to make you a better duelist because it allows you to tap into your core magical ability. You get faster, and yes, more powerful...over time."

"So..." Harry took over for Neville, who looked to have retreated deep in thought. "Does that mean someone who starts out kind of, uh, average in magical ability will get better and better each time he does this?"

Tonks tilted her head, thinking. She squinted at Harry and Neville in turn, probably understanding why they were asking her these questions—she knew about the D.A. No doubt she also knew that Harry had been trying to teach dueling, but she seemed puzzled as to why the boys were using the classroom as a public forum for their questions.

"Was Umbridge teaching you guys this stuff?"

"No way!" someone scoffed. It was Dean. "She only had us read boring chapters in that so-called 'textbook', and if you ask me it was all a bit too finicky. Real defense against the Dark Arts doesn't go by the 'resolve conflict peacefully' credo..."

"Not in most cases, no I guess not..." Tonks agreed, her dark eyes sparkling. She swished the quill around in her mouth a little. "Well, I don't think you'll be learning about Meditating your Magical Center until you actually make it to Auror training, if that's the sort of thing you want to pursue. But to answer your question, Harry—it doesn't exactly work like that. It's meant as a training device. It helps you tap

into power you can use to improve your reflexes and your spell work during a duel. How you use that power once you find it, that is, how good a duelist you actually become...well that's up to you."

Harry couldn't help feeling that the 'you' at the end of that sentence was meant only for Neville and himself. Her dark, shining eyes lingered on his before she turned and went back up to the desk, rummaging around for a bit until she found a stack of parchment and picked it up. She held it so they could all see it.

"This is Umbridge's lesson plan. I read through it. It looks as boring as you all say." Everyone laughed as she flipped through it. "I would love to teach you guys stuff that you could use, but according to this thing that's not really allowed."

A collective rise of booring echoed through the classroom.

"That's rubbish! We've got O.W.L.'s coming up and we haven't learned a bloody thing!" someone offered irritably.

"Well...I'll tell you what—I don't really have a lesson plan. I was offered the post on kind of short notice, you know. So I'll let you guys decide what you want to learn. Just as long as you include some things in there you know you'll need for your exams."

"Um...how do we know what we'll need for our exams?" Hermione spoke up for the first time.

Tonks frowned. She turned around again and rummaged on the desk some more. She found another piece of parchment and studied it for a moment before taking her wand out of the inner folds of her suit jacket. They watched as she duplicated the parchment and then sent the copies out towards them all. There was a copy for each student that landed neatly in front of him or her at Tonks' bidding.

Harry read the first line.

EXAM REVIEW: THE LESSONS UNDERLINED IN RED ARE TO BE COVERED DIRECTLY FROM THE TEXTBOOK ONLY!!!

“Does that look like it?”

Everyone gaped at the list of stuff they could've been learning that whole year. Among these things were several counter-curses that would've been great for the D.A., also information about Vampires, something called Inferi, and other dark creatures. Giants were on the list as well. Harry saw that this list had been written by Umbridge, signed by the Minister, and had probably not been meant for anyone's eyes but theirs.

“Are we supposed to be seeing this...?” Pansy Parkinson asked, as if afraid Umbridge would swoop down on them angrily, prison chains a-clinking.

“Probably not,” Tonks shrugged. “Here’s my deal: I’ll teach you the stuff you see listed there—that should prepare you sufficiently for your O.W.L.’s. And then if we have time, I’ll teach you whatever else you’re curious about just as long as it isn’t too difficult. So pick what you want to learn first. Anyone?”

Several hands shot up. Hermione looked extremely keen on something, and though Harry would normally never attempt to raise his hand in company with hers, he held his own up as high it would reach. He wanted to learn those counter-curses so they could practice them in the D.A. Tonks was on the point of picking him, too, but just then the door to the classroom opened and everyone turned to see who was coming in. It was Draco Malfoy. He stuck his white face in and peered at them all, his blue eyes looking considerably darker than usual. Tonks frowned as he came in and walked down the length of the rows of desks towards her. He held out a note to her, not speaking either to apologize for or explain his tardiness. Harry watched as Tonks read the note. She nodded shortly and Draco went to his seat between Crabbe and Goyle.

“Draco Malfoy...”

“Yeah.”

“Well you’re late, so you don’t get to vote.”

"Vote on what?" he asked rudely. Harry wanted to wipe that indifferent scowl off his face.

Tonks ignored his attitude and turned to Harry again. She smiled at him and nodded for him to speak. "Harry, what did you have in mind for my first lesson, then?"

They spent that first class giving Tonks her lesson plan, which in Harry's opinion got her off on exactly the right foot with everyone. Even the Slytherins seemed impressed, with the exception of Draco's little clique. The fact that Tonks had given them the power to choose what they would learn after they'd spent over half the year being shushed and told that their opinions absolutely did not matter...well went a long way with the lot of them. Tonks was pretty clever. Harry liked her a lot, and he was getting over his initial weirdness with having her as a teacher.

Hermione had not asked about one of the O.W.L. lessons, but to Harry's intrigue, asked if maybe Tonks might teach them a little bit about being a Metamorphmagus. She enthusiastically agreed that once they were done going over all the stuff they need for their exams, she would tell them whatever they wanted to know at the end of each lesson. This revelation about Tonks made the students even more excited, and everyone left the classroom exactly as they came in—full of chatter.

Harry gathered his stuff and prepared to leave. He saw Draco doing the same in his peripheral vision, and as he was slinging his bag over his shoulder, he heard Tonks speak. "Malfoy?"

"Yes?"

"I forgot to mention earlier—ten points from Slytherin."

Harry turned around, unabashedly watching for Draco's reaction. The other boy looked confused for a split second and then he glared at Tonks. "For what?"

"Being late," said Tonks coolly, still chewing on her quill. She was copying the list of lessons the class had agreed on from the

chalkboard with her wand and, peeling the writing line by line off the board, transferring it onto a clean piece of parchment on her desk with her back turned. Harry wasn't paying particular attention to the fact that the only students remaining were himself lingering at the door and Draco, who still glared at Tonks' back.

"You can't take points—I gave you a note from Professor Snape. He was given permission--!"

"Yeah, I saw it was signed by him. All the same—you're missing valuable class time. So let Professor Snape know that keeping you won't get you expelled or anything, but it'll hurt you in the long run..."

"You don't bloody know what you're talking about--!"

"That's ten more points for being a little snot. You want to keep arguing? I can keep taking points..." another one of those shrugs of hers as she turned to continue carefully transferring the text from the chalkboard onto her parchment. "Doesn't bother me much, but I'm sure your housemates won't like it one bit."

Harry saw as he was sticking one foot out the door that Draco was clenching his jaw hard. "No."

"Good. Be on time next lesson, okay?"

"But what if...?"

"I'll speak to Professor Snape. I'm sure he can find time between classes for you, can't he?" Draco didn't argue anymore as Tonks finally looked up at him and smiled. He turned sharply and walked towards Harry, who stood aside and let him pass, his foot still sticking out into the hall while the rest of him lingered. Tonks grinned and blew the lock of hair out of her eye. "How did I do on your first class, Harry?"

Harry grinned at her. "Brilliant."

Harry's grin and a huge chunk of the good mood Tonks had put him in vanished when he emerged from the classroom to find Draco in his face.

"Getting rid of Umbridge must've made you feel pretty good, eh Potter? But you still haven't gotten rid of me."

In the seconds it took for Harry's brow to crease with anger, his wand was drawn and he had slammed Draco bodily into a row of lockers. His lips parted, and a hex was ready at the tip of his tongue but McGonagall's voice, "Potter!" rudely interrupted him. Breathing hard with the effort not to go ahead with it anyway, Harry turned to face her as he slowly released Malfoy.

"Professor?"

"Leave Malfoy alone and come with me to my office."

"You're not going to take points? He just started a fight with me!" Malfoy piped up.

McGonagall looked at Malfoy like he was a roach that badly needed stepping on before gritting, "You are on thin ice, Malfoy. Be on your way, now." She glared at him coldly as he stalked off down the hall before turning back to Harry and nodding that he follow her. He did, wondering as they walked exactly why Malfoy was on thin ice with her. If he were lucky...

They walked in silence through groups of other students on their way up to her office. Once there, Harry walked inside and was immediately dipped in fire from head to toe at the sight of Remus Lupin standing solemnly along with Snape. The office was dark, quiet, and heavy with tension. Harry's skin was white-hot all over but cold at the same time. He felt like he was in trouble, but he also felt like Snape's time had come. He stood near the door as McGonagall walked in behind him, closed it, and went around to the other side of her desk to face him. Lupin stood to Harry's left; Snape to Harry's right. They were all looking at him. He took a steady breath to calm his furiously beating heart.

"Harry," McGonagall began quietly, "I've brought you here to ask you some questions. And you know what questions I'm going to ask, don't you?"

Harry nodded.

"This is absolutely--!" Snape started bitterly, drawing Harry's eyes to him for a brief moment before McGonagall silenced him.

"Severus, you know perfectly well this needed to be done, and do not shove your egotism in my face that way. You are not above reproach!" Snape glared at her but said nothing. Harry began to feel better. McGonagall turned back to him, her face now set with aggravation, and sighed. "Harry I want you to repeat, so that we can all hear it, what you say you saw in Dumbledore's pensieve."

"Remembering that you were prying into my private memories, of course..." muttered Snape.

Harry ignored him. "I saw a memory of Snape going to the Malfoy's the night Dumbledore left. He met Lucius Malfoy there, and there was a meeting going on. A-A Death Eater meeting..." Snape growled under his breath and shook his head slowly. Harry's eyes flickered in the wizard's direction again before he continued. "The other Death Eaters—they were angry with him."

"Why were they angry, Harry?" Lupin spoke. Harry looked at his former professor's face, but could not read his expression.

"They were upset because he hadn't told them about Professor Dumbledore leaving."

Snape folded his arms across his chest; his white cuffs the only break in black from the neck down; and fixed Harry with a calculating gaze. "How upset were they, Potter?"

Harry frowned, glaring right back. "Very."

"Upset enough, would you say, to actually question my loyalty to the Dark Lord?"

Harry knew what Snape was trying to do, and he did not break eye contact. He even thought that if Snape wanted to try and see into his mind, he would let him know how much he hated him, how much he wanted him caught and gone. This maliciousness was strongest for the Potions Master, second only to his hatred of Voldemort, and followed closely by that of the ferret he'd almost hexed to hell in the hallway minutes ago. "Yeah—they accused you of being a traitor."

"Yes they did. Just like you are doing now." Snape sneered.

"Severus..." Lupin spoke in warning.

"And Potter, what else did you see?" Snape continued almost pleasantly, his sneer growing as he stared Harry down. "Go on, Professor McGonagall is waiting. Tell her everything."

"I did—you told them Dumbledore asked you to teach me Occlumency because of my connection to Voldemort." Harry ignored Snape's snarl at hearing his precious Dark Lord's name spoken. "You told them that you were softening me up for him—you said you didn't need to tell Voldemort anything because he already knew thanks to you!"

"Severus you told them that?" McGonagall spoke up at once.

"Yes, I did, Minerva," uttered Snape silkily, still staring at Harry with his arms crossed, "though Potter is conveniently leaving out that I had no choice!"

"Didn't you?" she shook her head at him in disbelief. "Didn't you? No one was to know about their connection! It was of the utmost importance—for Harry's safety! For our safety! You have jeopardized the Order!"

"I have done nothing of the sort!" Snape exploded, finally breaking his resentful gaze on Harry and whipping around to face her. "Potter, did you happen to see that Bellatrix Lestrange—a madwoman if ever I've encountered one—was hell-bent on dismissing the story I initially gave involving Umbridge?"

Harry hesitated. Lupin sighed and gestured for Harry to answer. "Go on, Harry..."

Harry found himself feeling immense annoyance with Lupin, but he set it aside and nodded reluctantly.

"What story about Umbridge, Harry?" McGonagall demanded, despite having been yelled at by Snape.

"...he told them that he knew Umbridge would tell Lucius about Dumbledore."

"And did she?"

Harry hesitated. "...yes."

"And did your prying eyes happen to catch Rookwood and McNair siding with her?" Snape growled. "Did they catch me waiting to see how far she would take her accusations before resorting to divulging my agreement with Dumbledore?"

Harry didn't speak. He was becoming aware that Snape was painting himself as the ultimate risk taker; the bold, lone Order member who risked his life to protect their cause; even if that meant sacrificing some valuable information. "All you cared about was bloody Malfoy!" he yelled, the anger rising in him fiercely. "All you went there for was to confront Malfoy's dad—you're so in love with his wife that you--!"

Before Harry could finish Snape had pulled his wand—he felt a sharp, stinging slap across his cheek and he stumbled back. Everyone gasped and Lupin took a step towards Snape, drawing his own wand. Snape's eyes were on fire; they were burning black pools as he stood in the same spot he'd occupied at the beginning of this little interview, having evoked the assault from across the room. Lupin had not even parted his lips and McGonagall's mouth had not even dropped open fully yet before Harry felt a burst of rage rocket through him. Seconds later a huge hole was blown into the bookshelf above Snape's greasy head, and several burning pages floated down on him. He stood stone still while the rest of them reacted to Harry's display of power.

“HARRY!” McGonagall shouted, her hand coming up to cover her mouth in shock. Her eyes were wide with anger and awe. Lupin merely stared at Harry, his face drawn in concentration and his wand hanging limply at his side. Harry breathed—glaring at them all but most of all at Snape. “Severus...do not ever in your life strike that boy again in my presence, wand or no, do you understand me?” McGonagall spoke after a moment.

“I’m not a boy anymore Professor...” Harry uttered quietly—Snape would not look away. He had injured him with what he said about Malfoy’s wife; Harry knew it and enjoyed it. Hatred...hatred beyond hatred filled him up as their eyes penetrated each other’s. “If he strikes me again I’ll strike back.”

“Harry,” Lupin began carefully. “Where did you learn that...?” It seemed he could not properly articulate what he had just seen.

“It’s something I can do. Something he’s been trying to control so Voldemort can have me.”

Lupin sighed hard as if he’d had enough and he walked toward Harry, forcing the boy to look away from Snape. “Harry listen to me. Severus came to me that same night you told Sirius what you saw. He told me everything you told me, and I did not tell him that I already knew. He and I agreed that Dumbledore must be contacted immediately. He also knew that Dumbledore would not be pleased when he found out—but Harry, after listening to his side of things, I cannot see how he could’ve avoided it.”

“How can you say that?” Harry demanded. “He could’ve told them loads of things!”

“Yes, but if they didn’t believe him about Umbridge, what makes you think they would believe anything else?”

“I don’t care!” Harry shouted, fuming.

"Harry...the information he gave them was just enough. Just enough—he told them something that they believed Dumbledore would never want them to hear."

"Because—he—didn't!" growled Harry through clenched teeth.

"And furthermore," Lupin laid hands on Harry's shoulders to calm him. Harry wanted to shake them off. "I'm sure he won't mind me telling you...he was absolutely ashamed of himself. I can tell you I saw it as clear as day...he regrets what he did...but he had to."

Snape looked as if he very much minded Lupin telling Harry this. And Harry didn't believe he felt ashamed for a second. He had fooled them—damn it!

"You should be ashamed, Severus," McGonagall spoke up again. "You should never have stopped giving Potter lessons."

"Potter doesn't need me, Minerva, didn't you hear him?" Snape replied. "He's not a boy anymore, it seems."

"Do not let your stubbornness get in the way of--!"

"Potter has mastered enough of the technique—he can proceed on his own."

"What?" Lupin and McGonagall both asked skeptically.

Harry stared at Snape. That wasn't true...nothing that came out of the slimy arsehole's mouth was true, but... "He has managed to occlude himself and mastered a method that helps him close his mind at night. He doesn't need me."

McGonagall and Lupin turned to Harry. "Harry is that true?" Lupin asked.

He hesitated for only a second, seeing in Snape's eyes the same desire he felt. He never wanted to step foot in Snape's dungeon office again, and Snape was trying to arrange it. "Yes. I don't need lessons anymore. I can do it on my own now."

"And...what you did a moment ago..." Lupin started, gesturing to the still smoking bookshelf behind Snape. "Harry...where did it come from?"

Harry opened his mouth to speak but McGonagall answered. "Remus, what Harry just did has been lying dormant inside him for quite some time. And I can see now what must be done with it..."

Harry raised an eyebrow at her, intrigued. "What? What must be done?"

McGonagall stared at him appraisingly for a beat, then reached over and picked up Harry's Firebolt that had been leaning against the wall behind her the whole time. She held it up for him to take. "Take this. Go and eat your dinner."

"But...what about...?" he looked from Lupin to McGonagall in amazement. That was it? "What about Voldemort? What about the weapon? What about this power and what you just said? What about him?" He jabbed a shaking finger at Snape.

"Leave that to us to sort out Harry. Go to dinner, do not tell a single soul what we've discussed, and practice your Occlumency before bed, is that understood?" Harry's nostrils let out hot air; he took his Firebolt and gave Lupin one last look of dissent. Lupin merely nodded for him to do as McGonagall instructed. "And Harry?"

"Yes?"

"If you damage my property again...if you threaten to strike a teacher while in this school just once more...you will wish Umbridge had remained, I promise you."

Harry did not answer. He didn't know how angry he should feel; he simply couldn't quell the outrage churning inside him. He squeezed his broom handle until his knuckles went white, turned, and left the room.

When Harry was gone Remus closed his eyes briefly and slumped to sit on the edge of Minerva's desk. Severus stood fuming for a couple

of seconds before taking a step towards the door. “Why did you not come to us first, Severus?” The wizard and werewolf spoke quietly, staying the Potions Master. “Why did you have to wait until Harry found that memory?”

Severus turned on his heel slowly to face them both, his black eyes still simmering with resentment. “Found? He hadn’t found it, Remus; he stuck his sneaky, arrogant nose in my personal business and willfully watched that memory behind my back!”

“You left him alone. You did not protect it.”

“Of course you would find any way to defend James’ bloody offspring! No matter what wrongs he has done me, you two and Dumbledore leap to his rescue--!”

“I was defending you!” Remus shouted right back, standing abruptly from the edge of the desk. He sighed and rubbed his temples beneath his grown out, graying brown hair. He looked as haggard and gaunt as ever as he lifted his gaze to Severus again, but his eyes remained crystal clear and dead serious. “I was defending you to Harry...I was throwing down that boy’s beliefs about you—but it is clear to me now that he has every reason not to trust you, Severus, look at you!”

“Remus...” whispered McGonagall, but Remus shook his head.

“No, Minerva, I’m going to say this.” Severus drew himself up to his full height, squaring his shoulders as Remus confronted him. “Look at you—still angry and bitter over what happened years ago. Over the folly of a bunch of thick-headed boys...and you are punishing Harry because you cannot punish James, or Sirius, or me...when will you let go of the past? We’re all in this together now, whether we like it or not.”

“Punishment?” Severus scoffed nastily. “You don’t know anything about punishment, Remus. And you don’t know anything about me. Did it ever occur to any of you that I treat Potter that way because he is as rotten as the day is long? And you speak to me about the past?

Ha! The past just stalked from this room gripping that Firebolt as though he were wringing your neck!"

Remus' unusual eyes flickered at Snape for a moment, shining brightly as though the light of the moon were behind them before he calmed himself and sighed again for perhaps the hundredth time that day. "I have to believe..." he spoke evenly, "...that you are good despite what tortures you. I have to believe that Dumbledore trusts you because he sees what Harry cannot. Harry cannot see it because Severus you have wronged that boy...you wronged him with your viciousness and your ridicule. He has every reason and every right to loathe you. But I won't allow him to accuse you of betraying us because I do know something about you, despite what you may think."

Severus flashed him a warning look, but it was McGonagall who spoke next. "Well I am not satisfied with your beliefs, Remus. I want Severus to explain to me why he didn't come to us immediately after what happened at that Death Eater meeting."

"I had an urgent matter to attend to..." was all he would say.

McGonagall, suddenly incensed, slammed her palms on her desk and made an angry noise. "What urgent matter?" and she snatched a crumpled piece of parchment up (one of the notes she'd been given regarding Draco missing her classes) and brandished it at him. "Was it this? Was it Draco Malfoy? You went to attend to that little rapist rather than coming to the Order that you serve to tell us you've mangled our plans?"

"He didn't rape anyone, for Merlin's sake!" snapped Severus as Remus looked from witch to wizard in effort to understand what they were referring to.

"Oh, well he certainly intended to didn't he?! And, I might add, I would not have found out if Harry hadn't mentioned the offense when he came to me this afternoon! How can you possibly justify that?"

"Minerva, the boy has been tortured and poisoned at his own father's hands. I have given a promise...I have to protect him. Why can't any

of you understand that? Why are you so blinded by Dumbledore's love of Potter?"

"Severus, it is you who are blind..." McGonagall told him less than gently. "When you told me what he had done—I had to fight hard not to find him and thrash him myself. Fermentum or no—he is too dangerous to remain in this school. Damn Dumbledore for allowing it!"

"He had his reasons..." Severus almost whispered, sounding momentarily apprehensive as he gazed at her. "He trusts in me. He knows that only I can--"

"What? Save him? You cannot save him; he is gone!" Severus tried to protest but she kept on, throwing her hands to the air with her frustration. "Gone! Gone to his father, gone to the Darkness, gone to Voldemort and every evil intention his family has for him, can't you understand that? Let him be, Severus, you are fighting a losing battle."

The wizard draped in black shook his head over and over again, his sallow face folded in a mask of staunch determination. Remus felt compassion for his plight and for the first time began to genuinely understand where he was coming from. "No...no I cannot accept that. I have looked after him his entire life. I cannot leave him to..." he took in a breath, showing real emotion besides anger for perhaps the first time in a very long time.

"Listen to me, my friend..." Remus offered, stepping forward and actually placing a hand on his shoulder. Severus stiffened and glared at him, the emotion disappearing from his face. "Severus...if you do not accept that Draco is already becoming his father...if you cannot let him go...you will be taken away with him. Listen to me—you have served as a dual agent for the Light and the Dark for a long time...this duality has been very dangerous for your own peace of mind. If you cling to a boy that does not belong to you, you will be pulled away from us, can you see that? The darkness that has been bred in you will take you. There will be no saving him...you and Draco will go down that path together."

There was a long moment in which Severus stared at the other wizard silently, and McGonagall seemed to reinforce Remus' words with her own intense gaze. But then Severus spoke to them—he spoke to them with an air of finality that could not be ignored. And quietly...so quietly...he was choosing his path...they felt it.

"I too believe something, Remus. I believe what my mentor has taught me during my long years of 'duality' as you call it. Those we can save, we must. And I believe that Draco's fate has not been decided yet. I can still bring him to the Light." His dark eyes glinted in the lamp light. "You see I have loyalties—heartfelt loyalties—on both sides of this war. No one is wholly good or evil except the Dark Lord, and even he had the choice. The choice, Remus...Draco has not yet been given it. You are not my friend. You never were. Now take your hand off of me."

Remus took a beat to study his former schoolmate solemnly before obliging and removing his hand from Severus' shoulder. The dual agent of both Light and Dark said nothing more as he turned and strode from the office, closing the door sharply behind him.

Minerva sank down to her chair and stared after him. "He will abandon us for that boy, Remus. I'm sure of it."

"I know..." Remus sighed. "I know..."

She sat thinking for a few minutes, tapping her nails on the desktop against the silence surrounding them. Once her mind was made up, she reached for a clean piece of parchment and the quill from her ink jar. "I'm not going to sit around and wait for him to do it..."

"What are you going to do?" Remus watched as she began a hasty letter.

"Albus is abroad. He is finishing the rounds he began earlier this year once it was clear we would receive no help from the Ministry; he'll bring with him an order of wizards from wherever he can dig them up, and when he does I want to put them to good use. Also..." she finished a sentence, replaced the quill, and rolled the parchment up, "he must be informed about Severus' current intentions—they are

foolish and they will bring nothing but sabotage down on us. I do not care how much Albus loves that stubborn git; someone has to put a stop to this idiotic course of action!"

She opened a small wooden box that she had removed from her desk drawer, revealing about a dozen delicate, fire-red phoenix feathers. Remus watched as she walked around from her desk with the roll of parchment and threw one of the feathers from the box to the ground sharply. It exploded into flame at their feet and McGonagall stood back, tapping her foot impatiently.

Neither spoke as moments later Fawkes appeared in a flash of red flame. "Take this to Dumbledore, please, Fawkes. It's urgent." McGonagall gave the magnificent bird her letter and he disappeared again the same way he had come. "I am going to help Harry, since Severus has refused to. We all will."

"How...he seems very opposed to our input. I can't say I blame him..."

"We'll give him what he wants—we'll give him his autonomy and we'll help him develop that power Albus is so afraid will corrupt him. I cannot simply stand by and watch anymore, Remus. I'm taking matters into my own hands, and whether he likes it or not, in the long run Albus will thank me for it. Instead of suppressing the damned thing, we'll take it and make it into our own weapon! And Merlin help Voldemort when Harry finally gets control of it!"

Remus shook his head, scoffing bitterly despite himself. "Good god, Minerva, how? I don't even know what the hell that was! I've never seen wandless magic that powerful from someone so young!"

"We'll figure it out. Knowing Albus, whomever he brings back with him to join the cause will be able to help as well. We'll need all the support we can find; all the power and resources we can. Not just for Harry. If Severus leaves us..."

She didn't finish. Remus didn't need her to.

They called for Tonks. Eventually Mad Eye showed up. They made some plans. Harry was off fuming, thinking the world was against him; believing he was all alone in his struggle to simply understand what the hell was happening around him and to him. But he was not. Not anymore. A gathering of like minds was all he needed—a number of people who believed in him and who did not wish to hold him back any longer. Whether this was Dumbledore's wish or not, it was happening. As Severus Snape had recently put it—it was what must be done in order to gain sure footing before the coming war. And the war was coming...

Chapter Thirty-Eight: You Fight, Potter

Pain.

Pain beyond anything you could ever imagine. There is nothing but the pain. The dark room you are lying in, the time of night outside these walls, the man standing mere feet away...none of that has space in your mind. For the only thought that exists as this wretched pain permeates your defenseless body through and through—make it stop. Oh Merlin, oh god in heaven, make it stop...

And there are the screams. Your own horrible wailing fills your ears as you think this one thought over and over and over again. The thought beats against your brain like a hammer—over and over—and the screams echo in your ears from somewhere far, far away. And oh, the pain...

Then it stops. Just as you think you shall go mad from it, the pain stops and sweet relief is felt, though you are shaking uncontrollably and you can hardly breathe; for your insides are all twisted and hurting. Your organs feel like rusty metal chunks, scraping against the walls of your body with the tiniest movement.

That, Draco Malfoy came to find out, is what it is like to be put under the Torture Curse.

With everyone gone to dinner, Draco sat in the empty Slytherin common room, in the dark, thinking. Thinking resentfully, thinking intensely, and thinking of the beginning of these confusing and unpleasant times in his life. Thinking of how strange it was—at the beginning of this year, he had very little to worry about. There was only a faint thrum in the back of his mind, a small little blip on his radar that times would be changing. He had no idea how dramatically, or how fast. There had only been curiosity about the potion his father gave him before he left at the end of the summer. Draco now remembered that day quite vividly.

Elder Malfoy had slipped a pear-shaped, smooth, dark blue bottle into his hands while he was packing his trunk.

"What's this?" Draco frowned at it, turning it over in his hands; it had no label.

"A little something I had made—a gift from your father." Lucius smiled slyly and checked to make sure the hall outside Draco's bedroom was empty before continuing with his voice lowered to a whisper: "If you take it once a week until it is gone, you might find yourself feeling a bit more...capable...physically, that is." When Draco's frown deepened, his father chuckled dismissively. "Do you think I'm the first parent who's helped his son along with his athletic development? Come, you do want that Cup this year, don't you?"

"Yes..."

"Good. Then accept my little push and say nothing to your mother or anyone else, understood?"

"Yes sir..." Draco eyed the bottle again for a moment and tucked it securely into his trunk. "Thank you, father."

What fifteen year old boy wouldn't want to be stronger? He thought it would benefit him in Quidditch, and his father did not rectify this assumption. But then the strange feelings for Angelina began...and the challenge from Potter. And Christmas break.

Christmas break...

Draco sat forward in the dark green armchair and stared into the empty fireplace; remembering now. Remembering how he found out what that potion was really for. In that dark little room below grounds at their estate. That dark little room...and his screams. And his father, the villain in the shadows, hurting his own son.

"Draco..." Lucius uttered very quietly; sadly. "Are you all right?"

He wanted to kill him, this man who called himself his father. Draco tried breathing, sweat pouring down his forehead, his white-blond hair hanging damply in his face. He whimpered, furious but so very hurt. He would not—he would not let his father see him cry. "Father...p-please...stop."

"My son, this is for your own good." Lucius spoke again, still lingering in the shadows of the dark room. "Your weakness has hindered you for too long. It's time to put an end to it, and this is the way."

Christmas had been approaching, and Draco had come home very afraid of what lay waiting for him. What punishment would his father inflict on him for messing up with Umbridge?

In the past, he had been humiliated with simple spells or verbal admonishment that hurt his pride far more than his body. Once his father sealed his mouth shut for speaking out of turn in front of company; there were things like his being whipped by fiery lashes from an invisible rod after he'd broken one of his mother's crystal goblets, being made to stand with a slumbering baby acromantula balanced on his head for hours after falling asleep during an important function of his father's. "If you drop it," Lucius had uttered from his armchair in the study, watching as the eight year old Draco struggled to stay awake, "It will wake up and eat you..." And of course there was the ever-effective cane to the chest. Things like that were commonplace with his father, but this...in the common room Draco grimaced at the memory of his father's tranquil voice.

"Once more...and then I think that's enough for tonight. Your mother is waiting."

"N-No...!"

"Crucio!"

But too late, the pain was upon him again. Blinding, crippling, relentless pain ran all through him. His arms and legs went stiff, his belly cramped viciously. His brain melted—Draco screamed. Oh god it hurt! He jerked and flopped all around, saliva oozing out of his mouth and down his chin. He heard his father make a small noise, like he felt sorry...to hell with him! Draco managed to open his eyes, he saw...Merlin he thought he saw Potter standing there, hungrily inflicting this awful pain on him.

And then it was over again. Draco's body slowly relaxed and he lay there. The tears were coming. He would not! He would not cry! He lay panting on the cold floor, totally exhausted and weak from what he had just endured. Lucius stepped forward, into the small pool of light, and knelt down beside his son.

"Draco, listen to me..." The boy's eyes slid open and he looked at his father. "This was but a taste of what the Dark Lord will do to you should you ever fail him. Make no mistake...I'm not doing this simply for the sake of seeing you suffer. You must learn your place. This experience, my son, will make you stronger!"

"No...more...please..." he managed though it hurt even to speak.

"Hush now. Come."

He felt himself being lifted, his insides scraping together horribly, into Lucius' arms. A second later the air around him closed in tightly, like he was being sucked down a tube barely big enough for his body. He couldn't breath, and it hurt, but it was over quickly and with a soft pop they had touched down in his bedroom. He was lowered onto his bed and then he felt his father's gloved hand brushing his damp hair out of his face. He held his eyes shut, trying to overcome the writhing pain inside him.

"Lucius!" a shrill, frightened whisper came. "What have you done to him?"

Draco's eyes, in the present, became unfocused as he stared at the same spot on the hearth, thinking now of his mother. It was hard for him not to find some small amount of resentment where she was concerned. Some small part of him agreed with his father that she was being weak and too emotional. If she truly wanted to put a stop to what was happening, she could have; suffer if she must but she could've saved her son this hell. But then...a larger part of him knew that there was nothing to be done really. That larger part understood what his father was trying to do.

"Narcissa, please." His father's breath, on that cold winter night, fluttered his hair and eyelashes, which were stuck together and damp. Draco did not open his eyes. "He'll be fine."

"Draco!" His mother rushed forth; he could hear her robes fluttering in the wind that her swift movements created. His father was shunted aside and the leather glove left Draco's hair abruptly. Seconds later his face was being covered with kisses. "What have you done to him?"

"Get a hold on yourself, will you? I said he is fine!" Lucius hissed impatiently. "He is weak right now, but he will recover."

"How?" Narcissa's voice took on its own hard edge. "Look at him! He is so very pale...he is shaking, Lucius."

"He needs the potion, that's all. I shall fetch it for him, and in the mean time, stop your incessant smothering."

His mother was rising to her feet again; he could see the shifting shadows on the backs of his eyelids. Draco could hardly move; his insides hurt him so. He wanted to simply fade away into cool, peaceful sleep and be done with them both.

"He is too young. Have you gone mad? You're torturing your own son!"

"Do you really think I enjoyed that, my love?" Lucius' voice was soft and calm, but his wife and son could both hear the menacing undertone it possessed. "I can assure you I did not. Narcissa, you know this has to be done. Have you forgotten already? Have those years of 'freedom' really deluded you so much? It was you! You brought this on us, and we made a promise that we cannot go back on, or there will be a much graver price to be paid than Draco's suffering right now." She gave a miserable shudder but said nothing as he continued, "The Dark Lord has taken an interest in him already; he has not forgotten either. You should be grateful our son still lives. Grateful that we are still alive."

"Is there no way...no way at all that we can stop this?"

"My darling, you know the answer to that. And indeed—I'm not sure I think it necessary to stop. You are too afraid; you are not thinking as I have been thinking. I have plans for our boy. I was blinded by your type of fear once before, but not now...oh no. Now I see clearly that this is an opportunity. Draco cannot—listen to me, Narcissa—he cannot make mistakes the way he did with Umbridge. If he can allow himself to be beaten so easily against Potter in a childish duel, then how can he hold his own in the company of the Dark Lord?"

Draco stood up from the armchair and began pacing the room, scowling at the thought of his father's belief that he'd failed with Potter in the so-called 'duel'. Had he failed, then? If failing meant he hadn't succeeded in killing the brat, then yes Draco supposed he had. Oh but it was just like his father to assume Draco was weaker than he actually was.

"Is that what made you do this? Harry Potter?" His mother had asked indignantly. Draco did open his eyes, and he could see through his damp lashes that his father was gripping his mother by the arms firmly. She was attempting to pull away from him but he did not let her. "Do you have so little faith in your own child?"

"If I didn't have faith in him, Narcissa, I wouldn't be doing this."

Draco remembered seeing his mother melt into tears and she slumped forward in her husband's grip; her shoulders shook as she sobbed. Lucius' features creased with disdain and he held her away from him, letting her go when the crying deepened. He turned his back on her. "I don't want my son to become a Death Eater!" she cried.

"I'm afraid that isn't your choice," Lucius responded almost whimsically. "If something happens to me--"

"Oh, Lucius..."

"If something happens," Lucius repeated, firmly this time, as he turned to face her again. "Draco will be called upon to take my place. No matter how young he is, he will be called. I taught him a lesson. I

am teaching him a lesson. He will be stronger, and he will know what to expect going in. He will not ever make the same mistakes I did. He'll thank me for that, I promise you."

Narcissa gradually stopped her crying and took a deep, shuddering breath. When she spoke next, her voice was calm and steady. "You still haven't forgiven me, Lucius. That's what this is about, isn't it? My child...my only son..."

"Do not be foolish, Narcissa," Lucius took a step toward her, his eyes flashing dangerously under the white gleam of the falling snow outside Draco's window. "Perhaps you need to be reminded of your place as well?"

"I know my place. I am Draco's mother. And you are his father! It's our job to protect our son, not hurt him! Please...don't do this!"

"I have already put things into motion. If you want to help Draco, see to him now—but I warn you, do not try to resist the Dark Lord's will. You'll surely kill our son that way."

And without another word Draco's father had left them, his black robes billowing around him dramatically in the silence.

What had she done? Draco frowned as he stared into the black fireplace...the darkness in that area consumed his vision. What had she done to end her son up on the dirty stone floor of her husband's cellar, praying to god that he wouldn't die from the pain?

Draco stood up now in the common room by himself, waiting. He had received a letter from a coal-colored owl earlier that afternoon. He had never seen the bird before, and it landed on his windowsill, pecking its beak against the pane urgently. He was alone then; just as he was alone now; and he had the feeling the owl had waited for such a situation. The letter attached was definitely from his father, though it was not signed. It simply said 'do not go to dinner tonight; stay by the fireplace and make sure you are alone'.

Draco had almost told Snape about it when he'd gone to fetch his tonic, but the Potions Master was upset and at the end of the interview Draco didn't have the guts to betray his father.

"It shouldn't have been this way..." Professor Snape had said angrily under his breath as he mixed the tonic he'd been giving Draco for two days. Draco watched the smoke from the concoction waft up to the professor's face. "Lucius has no idea the damage he has caused!"

"Why are you so upset?" Draco asked curiously. "Did something happen? Did you talk to that Professor Tonks woman?"

"Not that it is any of your concern, Draco," Snape avoided his gaze as he dropped some twisted, greenish-looking root into the cauldron, causing the liquid swirling around inside to turn pitch black. "But I am only 'upset' with your father. And with you, I might add, for getting yourself into such a foolish position with Angelina Johnson."

"You didn't tell him about Angelina, did you, Uncle Severus?" Draco asked quietly. "He would kill me."

"He's already tried, hasn't he?" Severus snapped, bottling the black substance and thrusting it at the boy. "I am making you potions to treat the poisoning and the repeated torture he has inflicted on you, Draco, these are not cough remedies."

"He said it would make me stronger," Draco said simply, gazing at the potion with distaste. "Make me ready..."

Snape clenched his jaw and glared at Draco for a moment before returning to the cauldron, Vanishing the substance inside, and beginning a new potion. "It isn't my place to try to talk sense into him; you are his son, not mine..." Draco thought he heard a hint of regret in the man's voice. "But if he had only placed you under me...you could've been learning things other than the nonexistent endurance of the Cruciatus..."

"What would you have taught me? How can brewing potions protect me from You-Know-Who's anger?"

Snape looked at the boy sharply, mid-way through opening another bottle, this one containing thick knots of reddish-brown herbs. “There is more to the art of brewing potions, Draco, than your narrow-minded father will have you believe...” his voice rolled out the sentence with silky contempt, and Draco knew he had offended him. He hadn’t meant to speak ill of the art—he himself appreciated it a great deal, but it was hard now to keep the bitterness over his current situation from seeping into his opinion on the matter.

As they waited for this potion to finish brewing, Professor Snape finished his examination of Draco’s body. In the last couple of weeks, he had seen dramatic improvement in the areas where Draco had been affected most by the curse. Previously his body had been covered in certain areas by the trademark gruesome red and black bruises that indicated the application of the Cruciatus. The tonic he’d been giving Draco was designed to control the spasms that often attacked the ravaged insides. The spasms always came, and they always prolonged the healing process, and with the amount of torture that had been inflicted on the boy, it should have taken him several weeks yet for this amount of recovery to start showing.

“I thought you understood this, since you seem to pay attention at least half of the time in my classroom...”

He frowned as he carefully put pressure on one of Draco’s ribs. It was certainly interesting...the Fermentum had indeed given him strength, and he was healing much faster than Snape expected. But there had been a price for that.

“I do...I mean, it’s interesting, all the things you can do with potions...” Draco couldn’t help referring, with his tone of voice, to what had been done to him. Snape nodded for him to put his shirt back on and turned to see to the potion.

“But that is not all I can teach you. I have managed to avoid being put under that curse many times in my years of service to the Dark Lord, and that is no small feat. Here...” he had finished stirring the root into the brew and was now scooping the potion into another vial. “This will help with your spasms. Take it once a day until it is gone.”

"Thank you, sir..." Draco attempted to make amends for his earlier insult and took the vial obediently. He didn't mention that the spasms had pretty much stopped, and in fact he was feeling very healthy. There seemed to be a need in Snape to take care of him, and there was a small voice in the boy's head that told him he could use this to his advantage down the line.

"How are you feeling?"

"I feel...good. Different."

"No doubt your father would be glad to here that." Snape paused a moment, studying the boy, before placing a hand on Draco's head. "If you need anything else, do not hesitate to come, do you hear?"

"Yes sir."

As he was turning to leave the office, Snape beckoned for the young Slytherin to come back to him. "Draco..." He paused; his features were creased this time with what looked like worry, and he shook his head. "Do you know what this life is—the life as a servant to the Dark Lord?" Draco couldn't think of an answer, and Snape continued, "If it were to become your life now...do you think you would be ready for it?"

These questions had thrown the boy off guard. He had not ever thought about an actual choice—he had never even considered that he had one. The look on his godfather's face...the emotion that was visible in his eyes...it disturbed Draco. The answer to this question was not easy, and Professor Snape knew it. So why was he asking? He and Draco's father had been Death Eaters forever; the Malfoy family was immersed in that world...weren't they? Wasn't Professor Snape?

"What other choice have I? Mudbloods and Muggle-lovers have poisoned our world. Father says since his day there are more of them now, like a disease that's spreading...it's disgusting." He swallowed thickly, feeling his temples burning with nervous energy that was partially excitement and partially trepidation. "Something has to be

done about it. I know what the life is, Uncle. My father made sure of that..."

"Are you afraid?"

Snape stared at him for a long time, and Draco stood near the door trying to look as mature and prepared as his father was trying to make him. He wanted to say yes...yes he felt the cold fear within him; he felt the dread. You are a Malfoy; act as such! But the words his father said to him stayed with him always. "No. I'm ready."

Snape looked as if he wanted to say so much more, but he nodded tersely and his features changed back into their usual sternness. "You remembered what I told you about staying away from that girl?"

"Yes..."

"I mean it, Draco. Take that potion—do not go near her again."

"But what if it's not working? I still can't get her out of my--"

"You have to! I don't care how you do it! If you have to stick yourself with a pin and let the pain remind you of yourself, you will do it or so help me...!" He had become upset, and Draco blanched at the sight of such anger. There was a kind of desperation behind it that the boy could not ignore. "The potion can only do so much, do you understand? The rest is up to you. It will be hard at first—you will go through a period of withdrawal that will be unpleasant and unpredictable. You will be confused and angry and you might even suffer physically, but you have to fight the desire, Draco. It is unhealthy. It will lead to your ruin...and she does not belong to you."

Draco felt the anger all over again as he paced in front of the fireplace. No...no she did not belong to him. She—belonged—to—Potter! He kicked a green cushion lying on the floor near his feet clear across the room. She belonged to that revolting, thick-headed, yelling, dirty, second-rate, ugly, ignorant, fucking arsehole Potter! Potter who would just—not—fucking—go—away! The dementors couldn't take care of him, the goddamned Ministry of Magic couldn't shut him up, Umbridge couldn't crush him, and no matter what Draco did he could

not be rid of him! And he had some kind of...gigantic, brute force inside him pushing Draco back, blazing and angry...Draco had never seen Potter the way he'd been in the dungeons that once. He was afraid of it; damn it all, he was afraid...but breaking through this fear there was his strongest desire..."Angelina!" he moaned to the empty room. He sank again into the armchair and placed his head in his hands, suddenly getting an ache. "Angelina..."

Potter wasn't fit for her.

Draco's anger and resentment of her had long since given way to something else. It had mutated into something astonishing...he was sick with it...he had taken the tonic Snape gave him, but all it did was make him calm, and the calm allowed him to think. The more he thought...the more he realized that he wasn't really fit for her, either. Or was it the other way around? His father would have him thinking like that. Angelina was a pureblood, which counted in her favor, but she was a Muggle-lover; a blood-traitor, to be a bit more accurate. Her association with the likes of Potter and Granger and those awful Weasleys suggested that she was one of those who believed that pureblood magic was not the most superior way of life. And...she was not fair-skinned or blue-eyed or any of the things that the Malfoys appreciated as traits. He could not understand what—what?—drove him to her. He simply hated the thought that it was a stupid potion that produced such feelings in him. When he was around her...even when she was nowhere near, he thought about her constantly. It was maddening! Angelina was the addictive potion. She drove him to weakness, though he struggled mightily to appear strong in her presence. She thought him detestable and pathetic and it infuriated him. The only thing that made him feel better was having her helpless around him. The only times he felt sane were when she was struggling against him. The power he felt during those times was almost as addictive as she was. Marietta Edgecombe was a poor substitute.

His thoughts were rudely interrupted by a flash of green light and a gust of same-colored smoke from the fireplace. Draco looked up sharply to see his father's head resting in the middle of the fireplace surrounded by the ghostly green flames. Elder Malfoy looked angry and put-upon. "Draco?"

“Father!” He stood up abruptly, wiping his damp face, and knelt before his father, whose eyes were darting all around them as if he could not trust his son to have made sure the coast was clear. “What’s the matter?”

“There is a warrant out for my arrest,” uttered the elder Malfoy in an angry hiss. He finally looked at his son once he was satisfied they were alone. “I have a connection or two at the Ministry and I wasn’t tracked here, but there isn’t much time...”

“What will you do? Are you going away...?” Draco felt panic mingling with outrage rising up within him. It was Potter’s fault...his father was being hunted now by the Ministry and it was Potter’s fault!

Lucius sneered, his eyes flashing with intent. “Fudge is a fool. He will regret not protecting me—the money and influence I provided there kept him in office!” Draco merely nodded, fuming silently. “The Dark Lord is furious; though thankfully I was able to remind him that this was Potter’s doing. He has given us a chance, Draco.” His father paused, watching his son with an appraising eye, before continuing in a malevolent tone: “This is an opportunity we cannot let pass. I shall need your help.”

A chill rippled through the fifteen year old but he said nothing.

“What should I do?”

“You have a mission—I give you a task for our cause. Your first before you can take the oath. Are you ready?” Draco knew that this was not truly a question. He knew that whether he was ready or not, this task would be given to him, and he would have to carry it out or he would suffer for it. Unbidden, the last moment of the first night he was tortured came to him as he met his father’s chilly expression.

He had watched his mother as she stared after her husband, her gray eyes growing large with fear and anguish. Then she turned her watery gaze on him, her son, and when she saw that he had been watching her she rushed to his side again.

"Draco...oh my boy...are you all right?"

He closed his eyes again as she descended upon him, her long white-blonde hair brushing against his face as her cool hands touched him all over, checking his body for any physical signs of the pain he'd endured. "Mother..." Draco uttered weakly as she kissed his eyelids, cheeks, and lips tenderly. "Mother, please...I'm fine."

"He hurt you...your father hurt you, my poor child."

"Mother, stop it." He had gathered his remaining strength to take hold of her by the wrists and push her gently away. He groaned deeply as a spasm of pain rippled through him and he had to curl up on the bed to cope with it. She whimpered and slipped her wrists out of his grip so she could hold him like a child. He resented this, and he tried to push her away again but he was too weak, and the pain was too much.

He felt the hot tears sting his eyes again and he fought them with all his might. But as Narcissa continued to hold him in her arms, rising to sit on the bed with him and whispering that everything would be all right, he could not help himself. The sob rolled up like a tidal wave and he made a horrible noise just as the tears overcame him. Draco buried his face in his mother's hair, shaking as he cried. She did not cry with him, but held him silently, stroking his damp cheek.

And this moment—here in this deserted common room on the brink of a real war—this would be the last time Draco felt like a child, he was sure of it. He was as sure now as he had been that night when he vowed he would never allow his mother to hold him that way again.

He nodded at his father slowly, not daring to breathe lest he start to shake. "Yes, father..."

Lucius smiled. "You will make me proud, son. I must leave you and your mother now, but if you do this right I will be able to return to our home. Potter will die and with our help the Dark Lord shall return to power again. Think of all the rewards you shall reap if you serve him well!"

Draco let his father's words wash over him. Perhaps...these rewards...perhaps if he did well and made the Dark Lord proud...he could have whatever he wanted. Perhaps he could have Angelina...

And his father spoke again, bringing him out of his fantasy.

"Draco, your task is simple. You must bring me the girl Angelina."
"Harry."

He opened his eyes.

Angelina was standing near his bed, her gaze blazing with determination. He frowned up at her, still fighting off the strong hold of drowsiness within him. He had not been sleeping, but trying to avoid succumbing to the dark abyss that would surely melt into another terrifying dream for hours now. Before she spoke his name, he had been losing the fight. Harry sat up in bed and sighed. "Angelina...you really shouldn't have come over here. Please, I can't...I need you to stay away for a little while."

She ignored his rejection and held out her free hand to him, her dark eyes glinting in the faint light from the quarter moon in the black sky. Hedwig hooted quietly as they stared at each other and Angelina parted her lips to whisper to him.

"Let's go for a ride."

Harry felt powerful desire rise up in him, a longing he had forgotten about until this very moment and those words. He looked to see that she was dressed in her nightgown, jeans, and her Quidditch boots. She held her broom with his in her other hand. He stared at the silver letters 'Firebolt' before his gaze rose again to meet hers.

"Get your cloak, come on."

Without saying anything, Harry got up as she asked and pulled on his jeans and a light sweater over his t-shirt. He took up his glasses from the nightstand and stuck his feet in his Chucks, bending over to lace them up. When he stood upright again, she was holding out his

broom to him. "Where to; the pitch?" he breathed, taking it firmly and reaching down to retrieve his cloak from its usual spot under his mattress.

"Wherever you want..."

Together they snuck out of the Tower and walked very carefully through the halls, both breathing as quietly as possible. Neither of them said much as they walked. This wasn't just because talking would get them caught. It was because Harry knew what she was trying to do, and he had so much to say...he felt so much right then that he hadn't a clue how to explain himself. He had said some nasty things to her earlier that day; he had hurt her feelings. And not just hers of course. He yelled at Hermione and dismissed Ron. His silence as he followed her out of the castle had to do with him loving her so much, and him wanting to enjoy this moment the way he would if he didn't have to worry about Voldemort hurting her because of him.

Angelina sensed his apprehension—he held onto her waist as they moved along under the cloak and she could even feel in his short, tight breathing against her hair that he was thinking very hard about something. His face as she bade him come with her to fly was full of emotion...his eyes held that same fierceness they had when he was pacing in the common room the night Dumbledore left.

In the library earlier that day, Hermione had whispered her concerns and they matched Angelina's. "He's pushing us away...something happened. He's scared."

"Scared or just mental?" Ron griped, still upset about it though Hermione had apparently wiped away her tears and was now looking as unhurt as she had before it happened. Hermione gave him a squeeze on the hand and he sighed, relenting. "He did look kind of funny, I guess."

"He said something really terrible to me when the two of you left. It wasn't like him at all. And..." Angelina felt her heart go heavy with dread. "...he was rubbing his scar. It was hurting him. I should have stayed and forced him to talk to me."

"We can't force him, you heard," Ron said. "He doesn't want us around."

"Yes, but why?" Hermione looked at them both despairingly. "It was more than just being annoyed with me; more than being frustrated with Occlumency."

It was small comfort that Harry had declared he would find a way to master Occlumency on his own—it did little to squash the plain fact that if he hadn't yet mastered it with a tutor (even one as aggressive as Snape) then it was prudent to believe he didn't have a strong chance of doing it now.

She hadn't seen Harry at dinner, and heard from Ron and Hermione that he'd been sitting with Neville in all of their classes. Neville wasn't around at dinner, either, and neither was McGonagall or Tonks or Snape. Hermione pointed out that all three teachers were in the Order, and they guessed there was a meeting taking place somewhere. "They're probably confronting Snape about that memory," said Ron, staring at the empty spaces at the staff table. "I'll bet Harry's in there with them. I hope they kick Snape out on his greasy arse. And Malfoy along with him."

"But what will that mean for the Order?" Ginny asked quietly, causing Ron to make a face at her. "If you listen to mum and dad tell it, Ron, Snape has been a very valuable spy for our side."

"That's what he wants everyone to think." Ron maintained bitterly. "But I believe Harry."

No one added to this, but simply sat in silence the rest of the meal, and they had no idea that the tide would soon turn, both for the better and for the worse. And it would start in the Room of Requirement, where Harry and Neville would spend hours that night.

Harry hit the wall hard and fell down with only his forearms to brace him against the stone floor. Across the room, Neville stood panting;

his eyes grew wide with fear that he had hurt Harry with the lasso spell he'd been working on for days. "You all right?"

Harry let out a grunt and nodded, slowly getting up. When he managed to shake off the pain that bounced through his whole body from the impact, he grinned and wiped his sweaty brow. "You finally got the hang of that one—good move."

"Yeah?" Neville beamed, also shining slightly from sweat. "I've been practicin' but it doesn't translate as well with no one else around. Just been using books and stuff. Wasn't sure I could pull it off."

Harry was sore, and so was Neville, but that was a minor thing the boys were prepared to deal with in light of what they had been discovering for the last hour and a half. Harry had gone up to the common room straight after he left McGonagall's office. He had been filled with anger, filled with fiery restlessness, and needing to expend this energy somehow. He found Neville and whispered, "Can we go now? Like, right now?"

"Eh...yeah sure."

"Good."

They both skipped dinner and headed up to the Room of Requirement. When they arrived, they hadn't really planned to be dueling for hours, but a quick chat in which Neville said it was better to show Harry what he could do rather than just talking about it made up their minds. Harry soon found after only a few minutes that everything he had learned—the stances, the battle charms, the meditation—it was only scratching the surface. What Neville had begun to discover during his lone sessions in the Room of Requirement was that he could be faster, more precise, more powerful in his execution, and that battle charms and jinxes and hexes could be combined in one or two quick moves that doubled the effect on the opponent. The stances helped; acting as a bridge between whatever two (or three if one had the skill to pull it off) attacks the duelist chose to use at a particular time.

"Neville, how long have you been coming up here by yourself?"

"I came up here every night if I could, but no one noticed..." Neville answered, and Harry realized this other boy had probably been feeling unnoticed his whole life, though this time he used that to his advantage. "I've been doing it since we started learnin' the meditation, and over break I snuck away when my Gran was taking her naps."

"But we're not allowed to use magic outside of school..."

"Oh no I just read and meditated. I know you need a release of power but I used my Gran's wand and did little stuff...nobody came. I was scared they'd catch me, but...nobody did."

Neville had been learning mostly by tinkering around randomly, but when he began to feel he was onto something, he made another discovery. It was a dusty book that was several hundred years old. It was called Master Duelist, Volume One. Neville found no other volumes, and when they longed for them in the Room, they did not appear. Harry could not recall coming across it when he was doing his hasty preparation for the duel on the pitch. What was in this book opened Harry's eyes to a whole new method of teaching. He had fooled himself through his anger into thinking that he had learned something, and so passed that knowledge onto the D.A. immediately. But in this book, Harry saw that he had been quite naïve.

"Where did you get this?" asked Harry, turning the pages carefully.

Neville paused, seemingly debating something with himself, before answering, "It was given to me."

"By who?"

"I don't know...does it matter?"

"Well," Harry frowned at it. He was certain now that he'd never seen it in the library. "Yeah, kind of. How was it given to you?"

"I got it a couple of days before Valentine's Day. I mean, it was a bit odd actually," he admitted. "I'd spent the whole Christmas break

being really excited about learning to duel, and then one day I get this parcel from a post owl. There was a note but it wasn't signed."

"What did it say?"

" 'I see you've taken an interest, so please allow me to feed it. You will make your parents proud yet, Neville.' And it was signed 'a friend'. That's all."

Harry wondered who had been watching Neville so closely. He thought he knew of someone, and this confirmed something Snape had yelled at him during an explosive Occlumency lesson. You are not the center of Dumbledore's universe...

He didn't mention his theory to Neville, who seemed happy enough that he had the book and was learning something. He went on explaining things to Harry, and Harry listened, putting Dumbledore's curious actions aside.

"The meditation seems to open a lot up to you, but I didn't get faster till after a lot of tries."

Harry realized that he had not meditated that often. In fact, whenever they did D.A. meetings, people usually wanted to just get on with the dueling. Since there were so many of them, he agreed it would take too long to wait, and he liked to practice with them one by one most times. When he did do the exercise...well usually something explosive followed. Or something strange. In Umbridge's office...in Snape's...floating desk, Patronus...Voldemort.

Harry and Neville were not the same. Harry determined early on that the other boy's revelation had little to do with his own, so he kept quiet while Neville explained himself. Apparently, according to Neville, the more you did it, the easier it became, and the better you got. But of course having a limited knowledge of dueling itself hindered his progress, and having no one to test things out on proved problematic as well.

The book revealed eight more stances, each serving a different kind of spell. There was a set of stances for defensive spells like the shield

charm and the deflector charm; a set for a wide range of offensive spells that sectioned off in categories that ranged from physical harm to the opponent to spells that affected the very environment around you in order to gain the upper hand. Common sense, beginner's stuff as it was—Harry had not yet begun to delve into the practical application of these methods and as exciting as it was, it was frustrating as all hell. Months...months of today we're learning Shield Charms...let's do Stinging Hexes tonight...oh hey guys you've finally managed to get these stances down, now let's see you actually throw spells at each other...

"Well, Neville why didn't you tell me? We could've been doing this in the D.A. the whole time."

Harry was more curious than angry. Obviously, Neville had waited until he could prove something to him before he revealed himself, and Harry wanted to understand why. It wouldn't have been a competition or a conflict if Neville had simply told Harry what was going on. Hell, some days Harry could have used the help teaching.

"I don't know," Neville said at first before faltering under Harry's gaze. "I mean—I've never been particularly good at anythin' my whole life. My Gran says I'm a mediocre wizard and that if I don't get a backbone..." he paused, swallowing his words. "When I got that letter, and I started comin' here by myself...I felt..." he didn't finish.

Harry felt a pang of empathy for Neville, and he remembered the expression on his fellow D.A. member's face in St. Mungo's.

"You're not mediocre, Neville."

"No..." Neville said, staring at his wand gravely. "I won't be anymore." He looked up at Harry again. "I kept it to myself for so long because I figured it couldn't hurt to let people keep thinking I'm rubbish. Malfoy and all those gits...if they mess with me again...I'll show them who's a fat slug!"

Harry took the time to appreciate Neville's anger, and he could definitely relate. He scoffed at himself. "I saw you were getting

better—I thought I was helping.” He laughed out loud. “Maybe you should be teaching the D.A. Neville.”

“No, I-I couldn’t. I just want to learn how to fight. I think I really need to keep doing this...it makes me feel really good...” he blushed furiously and avoided Harry’s gaze as though extremely embarrassed to be feeling good about himself.

“Show me what you can do, then, yeah?” Harry changed the subject, smiling encouragingly.

Neville nodded enthusiastically; they rolled up their sleeves, bowed, and began.

Harry and Angelina made it outside and were almost down at the threshold of the pitch when he threw the cloak off of them and turned Angelina around by the arm to face him. The air outside was damp and still. The quarter moon was very bright. Harry felt the words rise up until they pressed painfully on his chest and he opened his mouth, whispering, “...I’m sorry...”

Angelina lifted her chin, her eyes pouring into his, and he reached an arm around her waist to hold her closer to him.

He needed to have her close to him...

“Angelina,” he continued whispering, his eyes flickering urgently, “I have something to tell you. God, you have to listen to me because if anything happens...”

“If what happens, Harry?”

“I had a dream, and Voldemort was in it. It was really him. He told me...” the pressure rose up again but Harry swallowed it down. He knew what to call it, this intense tightness that he was experiencing in his heart and lungs. It was fear. Real, gut-wrenching fear and he held her even tighter as somewhere in the forest an owl hooted. “He said he’s found me. Like he can...he can see me.”

Angelina had placed her hand on his chest when he brought her to him, and now she drew her fingers into his shirt and her mouth came open slightly. His face was stricken with almost child-like panic and his grip on her was desperate. "What do you mean, he can see you?"

Harry swallowed again. "It was more than that. I felt his intentions; I felt his desire to hurt everyone I care about. He didn't say it, but I know he can see you too...all of you. He's waiting inside me--in my head. He's going to use me to hurt you."

"Harry--"

"Listen to me!" he raised his voice, his eyes burning. Angelina narrowed her own at him. His voice had changed again, and all traces of that 'child-like' panic had disappeared in an instant. Now he was looking at her gravely; so very intensely. Yes, Angelina decided, now was the time to listen because he was looking at her as though she were already lost to him—that was not good. She began to feel her own panic rising steadily. "Do you know why I said those things to you earlier? It was because I couldn't stop it—it was because of him! And tonight, he came again—it was really painful. I felt hatred...hatred...but it was his hatred for me! He's getting inside."

"Oh god..."

He wanted to tell her exactly what happened, but he just couldn't bring himself to scare her like that. He knew his own fear when it was going on, and if that was any indication, he could imagine how scared she would be; both for him and of him; if he told her.

"I should have tried harder but now it's too late. And the only thing I can do is prepare myself; and the D.A. needs to start preparing as well. Something is going on—some things are about to change, Angelina. But just to be safe, until I can figure out exactly what to do, you and the others have to--"

She cut him off abruptly, her eyes blazing with defiance. "No."

Harry shook his head slowly. "I'm not giving you the choice, Angelina."

"I will not let you push me away again, and that's the end of it, Harry."

He didn't respond right away, only breathed slowly, holding her close.

Angelina felt she should do something; she couldn't let him fade into whatever bleak world was eating away at him; alone and afraid. They studied each other's faces and touched their lips together. Harry savored the feel of her soft lips against his. When they pulled apart again, she sighed and frowned thoughtfully. Choosing her words carefully, she endeavored to pull him away from that darkness.

"You've been going through a lot. You feel like you don't know yourself anymore."

He nodded. "You have no idea..."

"Will you do something for me?" she said softly, her voice sweet and comforting. Harry closed his eyes and nodded again, bringing his forehead to rest on hers. "Will you please trust that I can take care of myself, and know that I know you'd never do anything to hurt me or your friends?"

He sighed. "I wish it were that simple."

"It is. It can be." He opened his eyes again to find her smiling. "Let's go. I know something that'll make you feel better."

Harry reluctantly allowed her to remove herself from his grip and she took him by the hand, leading him to the gate. They climbed over and Harry tied his cloak around one of the iron bars for safekeeping.

Suddenly Angelina broke into a run, sprinting across the pitch with her arms wide open and her hair swinging all around. "Come on!"

Harry's heart leapt, and though he still felt ill at ease, he ran after her. They met in the middle of the pitch and he breathed in the scent of the grass in the air, closed his eyes, and exhaled. He looked again to find her smiling at him brilliantly and before she could speak he

leaned in and captured her mouth again, kissing her several times gratefully before peeling his lips away.

“I know what you’re doing...”

“Is it working?”

Harry paused, and asked: “Why don’t you just get as far away from me as possible? How can you put up with all of this...?”

“Because you’re a tough little bean and great in the sack.” He swatted at her and she ducked, laughing at him. Seconds later, though, her smile faded slightly and that...blazing determination...began again in her eyes. “I’m not going to pretend—I’m scared. But I’m not going anywhere.”

Harry simply breathed; watching her and letting her words wash over him.

“I love you Harry.”

He believed it with her looking at him like that. Yes...yes he could do it if she were there to support him. Harry’s emotions were always so quick, sometimes thoughtless, but not where she was concerned in this moment. She produced a slow burn in him that made things seem clearer.

“Let’s fly!”

They mounted their brooms, Harry’s heart beat so fast, and he kicked off.

The sensation of his body lifting from the ground; that zoom of air in his ears; that dip in his stomach as he shot up and away; was far and beyond the grandest feeling he’d had in a long time. Goddamn it felt good to fly again! Harry looked around to see Angelina chasing him around the pitch, and he grinned as he sped up, ducking and coming up again and looping in a big circle until he was behind her. She turned and came towards him and when they met she made a silly face at him before they passed each other again. “Hahaaaah!” Harry

yelled, accelerating as fast as he could to catch up with her as they circled around and around.

They chased each other and flew along side each other around the pitch until they came to a breathless pause in the middle, both grinning happily.

"How do you feel?" she panted, a lazy smile on her face.

"Brilliant." He said firmly. "You're brilliant, you know that?"

"I do..." He moved closer to her, leaned over, and gave her a sweaty peck on the mouth. She grabbed his sweater, pulling him precariously closer before giving him a deeper, more sensual kiss. "You see Harry I know who you are. You have to find things that make you happy. Flying makes you happy, right?"

"Yes..." he breathed, looking into her eyes. "You make me happy, too."

"Then as long as we stick together, it'll be fine. Stop pushing me away. I trust you, Harry. You trust me, now, okay?"

"Angelina I'll do anything for you..." Harry hadn't really expected to ever say this aloud, but he realized as he hovered in mid air with her hands on him that it was true. He had fallen butt-crazy, arse-over-elbows in love with her, Merlin help him. She responded by beaming beautifully and gesturing to the forest and lake beyond the pitch.

"Let's get some exercise."

"What do you call what we just did?"

"A warm up. Come on, let's go! Don't stop moving—don't stop or the world will end!"

She was off again, and he almost fell off his broom but righted himself just in time. Harry watched her go, squinting at her form in the moonlight, hoping against hope that she was right about everything being okay, before going after her. The wind whistled in his ears and

whipped his hair all around. Harry watched the trees approaching; he saw the castle on his right looming dark and majestic.

The black surface of the lake showed two figures moving with incredible speed as he caught up with her. They skirted the lake daringly before propelling up just as they reached the net of trees beyond it. Side by side, they flew along the forest top, and Harry heard the music of his Firebolt slicing through the air.

He put all his balance in his legs and lifted his hands slowly, closing his eyes and letting the wind rush coolly over his face.

Angelina turned to watch him, feeling so very relieved that his intensity from before was extinguished for the moment. They flew lower so that they could almost see the bottom of the forest. Angelina watched Harry and Harry's eyes were closed in blissful meditation...

So when something came out of the forest and swiped at Angelina, she barely knew what was happening until she'd been struck hard and began the perilous fall.

Harry heard her let out a yelp and his eyes snapped open to find that she wasn't there. His heart exploding with burning panic, Harry looked down and saw that she was falling from the air. He had no time to react properly because whatever it was came up again and he felt himself being knocked forward hard. Harry began to fall as well, and as he did he yelled while the trees swallowed them both up.

"AH!" He hit a branch, which snapped under his weight. "Whoa-ah!" He slid down the side of the tree, the bark scraping his skin painfully and tearing at his sweater. "FUUUCK!" He bounced off another branch that did not break, and it knocked the wind right out of him. "Oof!" he rolled over off the branch and fell five or six more feet to the ground with a thud, causing him to bite his tongue.

When he was able to eek out some twitching semblance of movement, Harry opened his eyes and saw through his now cracked spectacles that Angelina was lying on the ground a few feet away next to a huge, lumpy rock. "Angelina..." he uttered. "Are you okay?"

She sat up slowly, but did not look over at Harry. Instead she raised her head to the treetops, her mouth dropping open as she stared at something resting there. Harry spit out the blood that was collecting in his mouth and winced as he propped himself up too.

"Hey...can you see what the hell that was?"

"Oh my god..." she whispered shakily, still gaping at something in those trees.

"What?" Harry couldn't quite muster the energy to crawl over to her just yet. "What do you see?"

What the hell had knocked them out of the sky? What had they hit that would...?

The lumpy rock moved. Harry blinked, thinking maybe he was imagining it. But no...it moved again; this time slowly and deliberately. And then the five lumps it possessed curled over slightly as it moved into the moonlight, and Harry could swear that this rock looked like a giant foot with five huge toes...

Angelina scrambled on her hands and butt as fast as she could backwards towards Harry, still staring up above them. A deep, rumbling, disturbing sound came from those trees. Harry followed Angelina's gaze to a pair of large, scary-looking eyes nestled in the shadows maybe twenty-five feet above them—and he realized then that the sound was words.

"If you come any closer...I will tear you apart, little birds."

Harry stood in form, the rigid positioning of his arms and his wand now practiced and familiar to him, his back straight, his gaze a steady line across the room at Neville, who stood just the same. There was silence; the air in the Room of Requirement was thick with the combined mixture of sweaty activity, hot breath from various grunting and yelling that escaped them, and the sheer adrenaline they were building up and exercising out as they went along. Sweat sprouted from the pores on Harry's forehead and ran down the side of his brow in a thin line until it was caught on the wire frame of his glasses as he waited for Neville to make a move. "Again..." he breathed. "Ready?"

The other boy nodded gravely, his eyes squinting in concentration. Neville had lost the last duel—Harry got him by hitting him with a body bind because he left himself open. He followed that up by disarming his fellow D.A. member before he even hit the ground. He grinned now, unable to suppress the excitement he was feeling at the thought of Neville's retaliation. What would this kid pull out of his sleeve next, eh?

Didn't have time to guess.

Neville charged at him, and Harry propelled himself forward as well, the grin still leaving his face as a streak of red light blurred his vision. He twisted his body away on instinct, while at the same time incanting a deflector spell that sent Neville's charm right back at him. He was hit in the shoulder and stumbled back just as Harry hit the floor on his side, rolling over as fast as he could to avoid Neville's other spell that had followed the first one immediately—a combo that would have taken a chunk out of the floor had Harry not deflected the first one.

"This one's gonna hurt--!" Neville grunted from his position on his back on the ground as Harry jumped to his feet. Two more jets of same-colored light intended to both give a jolt of electric shock and burn wherever they landed erupted from his wand. Neville had done a fine job of coming up with spell combos from the lists in the second chapter. These spells were not particularly difficult to master—which was one of the reasons Harry was having a hard time accepting that there was only one volume of this handy little book. He had found the shock and burn among the lists of handy little offensive spells in the book and had shown them to Harry excitedly, explaining that when used together they would hurt like hell. Harry recognized the wrist movement almost too late.

"Whoa--WHOA!" Harry threw up a shield as Neville's spell combination came zooming towards him. Once they were absorbed and died away, Neville was already up and Harry had to react fast again, bidding his wand perform a spell he'd only just seen and memorized an hour ago. "Urgh-ah!" he lunged forward, unsure if he could pull it off, and grunted the incantation that twirled Neville around several times on his feet like a spinning top. The other boy stumbled

as Harry ducked away and got behind him, taking advantage of the momentary lapse in focus, but Neville surprised him. He spun around once again on his own to meet Harry, and throwing his opponent off-guard, made the wrist movement Harry recognized as the one necessary to deliver an invisible fist slamming into his body. Still surprised, Harry didn't think fast enough, and he was struck with a blow to the groin. Potter fell to the floor, coughing and curling up in agony. He lay cradling his abused balls in his hands for a few moments while Neville apologized profusely for getting carried away. "Can you..." Harry swallowed down his pain and rolled over to get up again, "Just...take it easy on the groin, okay?"

"S-Sure Harry. Sorry."

"Neville," Harry rubbed sweat from his face and shook his head at the other boy. "Stop apologizing. I'm the one who feels like a prat. I missed the point of this whole thing before. I was in such a hurry then to cause some pain; I just didn't get it. No wonder I got my arm broken..."

"Eh?"

"Nothing..." Harry coughed again, saliva collecting in his mouth, before swallowing and blowing out the last of his pain through his lips. "Good move, really."

"Cheers." Neville watched Harry for a beat, probably trying to decide if he should apologize again, before tapping his wand in the palm of his free hand enthusiastically. "You see? It's like you told us before, only I didn't get the hang of it at first—you can already be getting your counter spell out before your enemy hits you." Neville's plump cheeks were red and shining. "And I've been trying to use those spells in the second chapter there but I didn't know if I was performing them properly until now. It's excitin' isn't it, Harry?"

"Hell yeah..."

They took a small breather and Harry thought. Progress...had they been making progress in the D.A.? Certainly...but no one could do this. He found his own one-spell, one-move-at-a-time method of

learning and teaching dueling almost laughable when he experienced some of the firepower Neville had accumulated over his months of private brainstorming.

Harry remembered the first book he read. Had he completely misinterpreted it? It spoke of the wand, and how a wizard's wand was truly an extension of himself. How during a duel, a wizard could use his wand as a radar that tuned into his core of magic. How after a wizard locked onto his or her very core (using the meditation, fuck all, Harry really should have pushed that on them more), they could perform more easily and more accurately. Like Neville said—they were taking steps to grow to a point where all they had to do was think it, aim, and it would manifest itself. They would grow faster, more adept to other wizards' moves, and the longer they did this obviously the better they would become. The book he'd been given was so advanced that it diagramed all sorts of complicated moves and the meditation exercise was simply a given, mentioned only in the forward at the beginning. Neville had been studying these diagrams for weeks, and what he deciphered he showed Harry tonight.

Harry wondered how many countless hours Voldemort had spent before he became the Dark Lord sparring with people, dueling, meditating; tapping into his core. And Dumbledore...Harry imagined Dumbledore didn't even need any meditation; he imagined Dumbledore's instincts were so fine-tuned by now that he could defeat anyone he came up against...could he defeat Voldemort if they dueled?

Harry wanted to be that powerful. He needed to be. He didn't understand why Dumbledore couldn't see this about him. Occlumency wasn't what he needed—it was skills like this. Skills that could turn him into the kind of wizard who wouldn't hide from Voldemort before being forced to duel with him. No, he no longer wanted to hide. He wanted to fight, just as much as Neville, if not more so.

Neville was right—it was bloody exciting. It was more involved and more intense. It was the same amount of adrenaline as his glimpse of this on the pitch, but there was more to it than simply wanting to beat

the shit out of an enemy. He was trying to learn these things because they were tools that could serve him, and serve him well, down the line...when he would need them. When he would truly need them. Neville knew this and understood this. He had been operating with this attitude for months by himself.

It had been the driving force behind the D.A. that somehow got deluded in Marietta's complaining and Harry's relationship problems—they needed to learn the skills necessary to defend themselves in any (from the simplest to the gravest) situation and they weren't getting that in Umbridge's classroom. Fighting in this room with his dorm mate for going on three hours had reinvigorated that ideal for him tenfold.

Harry came out of his thoughts and nodded to Neville, hungry to take in as much as possible. "Again. Let's go again."

"All right, mate." Neville grinned, readying himself.

They went on for an hour more—ducking and dodging and throwing spells at each other zealously. They got angry, they got frustrated with themselves and each other—more than once Harry cursed under his breath when he was bested by Neville, catching himself in the disbelief that this plump boy could out-maneuver him. Then there were more times than that where Harry's excellent Seeker reflexes and actual confidence in his abilities thwarted Neville's efforts to gain the upper hand. The other boy lost his confidence frequently, allowing Harry to catch him off guard and surprise him. In fact, it was only in retaliation from these moments that Neville really showed himself—his need to prove himself to Harry seemed great, and Harry was amazed at the other boy's skill level. If not for his lack of confidence, Neville's skill level alone would make him a better duelist than Harry. That's not to say that Harry wasn't pretty good himself. He was better than Neville because of his confidence and his ability to adapt quickly to his opponent's tactics. He picked up on Neville's way of working out the stances the book taught them as though he were trying to be one of those diagrams—he was fast, yes, and he knew what he was doing but he was too afraid to let go and know he could do it without second-guessing himself. Still...they were both learning a lot from each other, and that was why they were there.

At the end of the hour, Neville got him with a combination of the Accio and the Trip Jinx. Harry was knocked off his feet and then found himself being pulled forward on the ground with speedy force towards his opponent, who quick as a flash disarmed him by sending his wand crashing into the wall across the room. “That’s how many for me now?” Neville breathed, sounding a bit unlike himself. Harry smiled and allowed himself to be hoisted up. Neville handed him his wand and they took another break. “Not that I’m counting or anythin’...”

Harry grinned and rolled his eyes. “Of course you’re not. Just give me a minute; I’ll get you for that last one.”

Neville suggested they do their meditation again. “It’s really great for focus, you know? I mean, I know in a real duel you won’t just be able to take a break and go off into a corner, but like you said...the more you practice it, the more centered you become until it’s like breathing. You’re just there.”

Harry shook his head and sighed. “I’ve kind of been using the meditation for something else...uh...other than...dueling.”

Neville stared at him with a confused expression on his red, sweaty face. “What other?” he asked through intakes of breath.

Harry winced at the lingering ache in his nethers from earlier and resolved to do a bit of confessing. They asked the room for water, sitting on the floor to catch their breath. “Do you remember that night I beat the snot out of Malfoy in the dungeons?”

Neville nodded. “Yeah. That was strange...”

“It was. But that’s not all.” Harry told Neville about his power, about the things he had done, and the reasons behind his situation. He told Neville of Voldemort’s hold on him, about his dreams, even about Occlumency. He felt no need to hide these things anymore; there was something about Neville right then...something about what they had been doing for nearly three hours...that simply washed away all pretense, all denial. Harry found the more he talked, the more he

wanted to share—all the little things he'd been keeping to himself spilled from his mouth and Neville didn't say a word. He didn't ask any questions and he didn't interrupt with his own theories. He simply listened.

When Harry had finished: "Whatever it is, it just comes out whenever it feels like it—which is usually when I'm so angry I can't see straight. If I could just use it the way I want to use it..."

"I think you can." Neville said simply.

Harry shook his head. "Not at the rate I'm going..."

"Well...if I can do this," he gestured around them at nothing in particular, meaning the dueling, "then I know you can do that, Harry. Wandless magic like that doesn't come 'round often, according to my Dad...only really, really powerful wizards can do what you're doing..."

"Yeah, but...I'm no match for Voldemort."

Neville swallowed thickly upon hearing that name, and Harry shook his head apologetically. The other boy paused for a moment, allowing the color to fill his face again as he let the chill from hearing Voldemort's name pass, before adding: "None of us are...but like you said—it doesn't matter. We'll still have to fight."

"Yeah..." Harry sighed heavily. "I don't bloody know, Neville. At this rate I'm starting not to care," he joked bitterly, knowing full well that he did care a great deal. "Maybe if he comes again, he'll get comfortable and he can dispose of a few people for me..." Harry sat staring darkly at a spot on the floor, unwilling to take back what he said. He lingered there in sourness, allowing his hatred of Malfoy and Snape to marinate within him until Neville spoke up.

"You shouldn't say stuff like that, Harry. You don't really mean it...do you?"

Harry looked up at him, paused, and shook his head again before standing up. "No I don't really mean that. Sorry..."

Neville stood up too, continuing, “Because...if you want to get rid of them you can do it yourself. Or I can help you. You-Know-Who wouldn’t see it coming at all, would he? I’ll bet that would change his mind about you, wouldn’t it?”

Harry did not answer.

To move on from the awkward silence befalling them, he suggested they spar again for a little while longer. Neville was all for it.

They stood at the ready, waiting for someone to make the first move, and then Harry acted—throwing a spell with a lightening-fast flick of his wrist. The red light hit Neville head on. The shield the other boy threw up shattered apart and Neville was struck in the face by Harry’s blow, caught off guard, and stumbled back, dropping his defensive stance. Harry’s eyebrows came up in surprise and he watched as gashes opened up and blood ran from Neville’s nose and mouth. “Oh...fuck...Neville, I’m...”

Neville touched his fingers to his bleeding lips and looked at the crimson stuff for a second. Silently, he leaned over to spit some of it out before he looked back up at Harry. His expression was, for perhaps the first time since Harry had known him, unreadable. Harry was stuck for what to do for a moment—he hadn’t meant to draw blood. Well...yes he had, because that was exactly the purpose of the particular hex he had used. It was designed to open a wound wherever it hit; to spill blood; to inflict pain. He didn’t know why he did that, but it didn’t seem to matter. Neville said nothing, only raised his wand in the air and whipped it down hard. Harry saw the fiery yellow lash of magic coming out of its tip and reacted by meeting it with his own, reddish orange one. The two magic whips latched onto each other and both boys yanked as hard as they could. Neville’s whip won out, and Harry found himself being pulled almost off his feet as he flew towards his opponent.

He tried to twist away, but he only gave Neville the opportunity to wrap the whip of magic around his throat—Harry felt it near his skin warm and stinging a little like many pins sticking him at once before it tightened and cut off his air supply. He stumbled backward, now grunting for the lack of air to breathe and the stinging of Neville’s

whip—his own had snapped away and died out once Neville got him by the neck. Neville heaved and then Harry was being physically dragged. He tried to aim his wand backwards, shooting Stunners and Disarmers blindly before the whip tightened and the pin-prick pain grew more intense so that he choked and sputtered out Neville's name.

"Get out of it, Harry. Don't just try and Stun me..." Neville said in a strange voice as he pulled harder until Harry was kicking all about on his bum at Longbottom's feet. Anger rose up from his breathless fighting and Harry reached up, making a slicing motion across the rope-like strands of glowing magic with his wand. The whip was severed and Harry fell to his back, but didn't even allow the air to completely fill his lungs again before he landed another spell that sent the slightly plump boy flying into the wall behind him, just as a harsh clapping sound rang out in the room. Harry looked up from where he lay, his wand drawn, to find Mad Eye Moody standing by the door. He clapped hard and slow, his magical eye electric blue and staring right along with his normal one at Harry and Neville.

"Hey..." Neville breathed, climbing up from the floor behind Harry and spitting out more blood. "Are you...?"

"Mad Eye Moody," Harry said quietly, lowering his wand as the ex-Auror stopped clapping and moved into the dim light from the lamps hanging overhead. "The real one."

"Evening, Potter. And who's this?" His magical eye shifted to look at Neville while his other stayed on Harry.

Neville held the back of his hand up to his bleeding face, his eyes narrowed at the elder wizard; extreme curiosity about Moody's presence evident in them. Harry felt the same curiosity filling him as he got up from the ground, and Neville answered, "Neville Longbottom, sir. Fifth year with Harry in Gryffindor." Harry noticed, even with the other boy's words muffled by his hand , that Neville did not stutter.

"Longbottom, eh? I knew your parents, boy."

"I know, sir." Neville said, standing up straight and wiping blood from his face. "You still do. They're not dead."

Mad Eye scoffed but inclined his head respectfully. "No...they aren't are they?"

"What's going on?" Harry asked, causing the magical eye to land on his face once again. "Are we in trouble?"

"I was just passing by," he gestured to the door as the eye rolled around once in its socket. "And I saw you two in here." Harry remembered that Mad Eye could see through walls, though he doubted the ex-Auror had only been 'passing by'. "I've been watching you for a bit--" he sniffed and clasped his hands behind his back. "-- and I liked what I saw."

"Neville was just showing me some stuff. We're gonna teach it in the D.A." Harry told him, totally unafraid of his reaction.

Mad Eye nodded his approval and walked further into the room. He smiled at them sourly. "Good idea, Potter. Though I wonder what good that will do."

Harry bristled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean..." Mad Eye's mad eye burrowed into him, gleaming and unusual, "...are you prepared to put some real work in? Are you prepared to do away with childish jinxes and start learning some real fighting? Some real magic? Are you prepared...to put what you're learning to use?"

Harry's heart snuck away from even beating and steadily climbed towards excited hammering in his sweaty chest. He knew that Neville was probably feeling about the same right then. "Well you said you were watching us..." came his answer without hesitation. "What do you think?"

Moody's smile grew wider, and more electric. "And what about this D.A. of yours? Are they prepared as well?"

"I've already spoken to them about it, sir. They know the war is coming."

"Do they, now?"

"We do, sir." Neville spoke up, coming to stand beside Harry, his wand at his side.

Moody considered them for a bit, and then removed his wand from his worn, brown leather holster. "Show me what you can do, then."

Harry's eyes flickered at the man, trying to gauge just how serious he was, and just where all this had come from. What was he even doing in the castle this time of night? And had he come here specifically to find Harry and tell him all this stuff about learning 'real magic' and putting it to 'use'? Before Harry could ask these questions, Neville spoke again; the blood on his mouth and nose now clotted and dry. "Both of us, sir?"

The ex-Auror nodded gruffly. "If you think you're up to it."

"Does Professor McGonagall know you're here?" Harry asked as he and Neville raised their wands. They moved to either side of him and got themselves ready as Moody let out a raspy chuckle.

"You gonna keep asking me questions, Potter, or are you gonna fight?"

Harry smiled, too. "Okay then."

Before he even got his mouth closed, a streak of silver light was flying towards him.

The eyes were the color of the burnt horizon just before sundown.

The black depths of the irises gleamed down at Harry and Angelina, who sat crouched on the floor of the forest, frozen in place. Harry swallowed a thick knot of apprehension down and with it his gaze moved lower, trying to make out what those eyes were attached to. There was a neck thicker than the thickest trunk of the biggest tree

Harry had seen in the forest. The shoulders were broad and wide and heaving; they sloped down to a massive chest rising and falling in shadow. Then the torso, the legs, the hands that Harry was sure were easily the size of Hagrid's cabin ...

The feet that had looked like lumpy boulders.

The thing moved again, and Angelina caught Harry's arm in a death grip, causing him to wince.

"Amusing...watching you fall...better than the others." The breath that rumbled out of this thing's nostrils swayed the branches; it echoed in Harry's bones; those eyes peered down at them, totally unkind, and bizarrely intelligent.

Harry felt more blood collecting in his mouth and he swallowed that, too, momentarily disgusted by the taste, before meeting the giant's eyes again. "We're not birds," he spoke very carefully. "We're students. Harry," he touched himself on the chest, "and Angelina." He touched her on the arm. She squeezed him tighter.

The eyes moved from his face to hers and then were draped in darkness as it blinked slowly. "And what, little students, are you doing flying like birds over the forest at such a late hour?"

Harry warily eyed the giant fists that he could just make out through what little moonlight poked through the net of trees. "We didn't know you were here," he responded, his heart racing painfully. "We didn't mean any harm."

He inched his free hand closer to his pocket, thinking of his wand that rested inside. He didn't know what spell in his repertoire could possibly take down a giant, but he figured anything was worth a try.

There was a long, uneasy pause, and then it moved again, this time raising its frightening hand up to its chest and saying, "I am Grawp."

Harry very slowly removed his arm from Angelina's grip and stood up. His hand still in his pocket, he nodded at the huge thing. "Grawp? Uh...how did you get here?" He figured if he could keep Grawp

talking, and maybe steer the conversation away from any further thoughts on tearing anyone apart, he and Angelina could make a run for it.

Grawp's head moved slowly, tilting like a chunk of mountainside about to roll off, and puffed out a gust of breath that smelled like burning earth. The branches swayed, a few birds flew off, and the giant answered him. "Hagrid brought me from the mountains."

The eyes narrowed until the lights of the horizon shrank to slits. Harry tensed up—why the hell would Hagrid bring a brutal giant with him back from his journey to the mountains? This thing looked about ready to crush Harry and Angelina—those massive fists were balling very slowly. He decided to keep his voice as calm and steady as possible. Angelina rose up slowly, standing just behind him. "He brought you all the way here? How did he manage it?"

"He tricked me..." Rumbling, brick-over-concrete agitation. "He promised me a different life here—one better than in those mountains. He lied to me."

Harry paused, feeling really uneasy now. He looked to Angelina briefly before tightening his grip on his wand. "Why would he lie to you? Hagrid isn't like that."

"We giants are not brainless, like the wizards think. We anger easily, yes, and we savor the thrill of killing. But that life I led, crowded in among the last remaining few of us, fighting for food...when they killed Golgomath, I saw my chance to escape...and here I find myself crouching in a forest with blood-thirsty Centaurs circling me at all times...with invisible walls shutting me in on all sides..." This next movement, fueled by anger, shook the very earth they were standing on, and the trees swayed and the last remaining birds escaped as Grawp balled his fists and leaned into a patch of moonlight, exposing his terrifying face. His features were twisted grotesquely in a mask of volatile emotion and his tinted eyes loomed above them like their own menacing entities. "He brought me here with a promise of freedom, but all I find are trees...and you."

Grawp growled. Angelina tugged on Harry's arm. "Harry...he's upset. Let's make a run for it..." she whispered. "...now!"

"Listen," Harry licked his lips, easing his wand out of his pocket and holding it at his side. "We didn't mean to bother you, okay? So we're just gonna go now..."

"Go? You cannot go. The Centaurs will kill you if they see you've been here with me." A gruesome smile revealing massive, cracked teeth cut into the rock-like surface of his features. "They despise me...the only reason they have not killed Hagrid is because he has been good to the creatures of this forest for so long. He is weak. I cannot stand looking at the kindness in his eyes..."

"Is that why you hurt him? Because he's a good person? He's half-giant you know!"

"Yes, yes, little Harry, I know! He is my brother, and that is the only reason I have not murdered him. He talks to me day in and day out of the Light, and the wizard Dumbledore, but I care for none of it!"

"You said you didn't like living with the other giants. You said you wanted to escape. You trusted him enough to come with him, why do you hate him so much now?" Harry couldn't help himself. Hagrid looked bloody awful, and Harry could not for the life of him understand why he had brought this thing back with him—why he continued to keep it hidden here so close to the castle full of 'little students' when it was obviously very dangerous. Had Hagrid really taken Dumbledore's mission to bring back giants to serve the Light so gravely that he would risk releasing this unholy beast on them?

Grawp shifted and the treetops shook apart for a split second—as they did Harry saw the full sight of the enormous being. He gaped at the sheer size of Grawp, and the magnitude of the carnality in those eyes...

He felt Angelina tugging at him again.

Harry fully and quite heavily understood Firenze's warning now, oh yes he did, as Grawp snarled and reached out for them both. He

reacted on instinct and fired a hex at the thing. It hit him on the finger just as he was about to grab hold of Angelina. Grawp roared again, but by then they had summoned their brooms and ran as fast as they could, passing whatever wards were surrounding the area and sprinting into the thick foliage ahead of them. Despite the mention of these ‘invisible walls’, however, Harry fully expected to hear booming footsteps or feel the quake of the earth from Grawp chasing after them, but he only heard branches snapping and leaves swaying loudly.

And so it went in the five or so minutes that they dueled: no matter what Harry and Neville did, Moody had a ready answer for it.

The silver light did not hit Harry physically, which caught him off guard—it instead exploded in his face and when he blinked the whole room was shrouded in darkness. He could see the figures of Moody and Neville moving about before him like eerie white-skinned phantoms, but the rest of it was just a bluish-black blur. Harry lost his concentration and the next thing he knew he was hit with another spell, this one lifting him up into the air and swinging him around until he crashed into the bookshelf near the pile of cushions. The hard frame smashed into his back, causing him to curse loudly as he fell to the ground again; a shower of books coming down on him. He could barely make out Neville trying to hit Moody with spell after spell—and spell after spell went clattering away to the walls and ceiling and floor. “Come onnn, Long bottom! You can do better than that!” Moody cackled madly, not a bit unlike the fake version of himself that taught Defense Against the Dark Arts the year before.

Harry picked up a fallen book, tossing it into the air and banishing it forward with as much force as he could with his wand. He picked up another and another and another, trying to at least distract Moody long enough for Neville to get a blow in. Moody sent the books away easily, but Harry’s plan worked somewhat—Neville got him around the shoulders with his whip. Harry saw it catch Moody and he let loose his own, getting the old man around the wand arm. Both boys pulled as hard as they could, trying to get him on his knees. Through the purplish darkness the silver spell inflicted on him, Harry saw Moody smile roughly and reach up to take hold of Neville’s whip with his free hand. He pulled, grunting with the strain, and Neville was

being pulled slowly towards him. Harry pulled his own whip harder, and Moody faltered, almost dropping to one knee. With effort, Moody was able to aim his wand at Harry, and before the boy knew it he was being thrown into Neville bodily.

The boys were knocked together like two sacks of potatoes and crashed in a heap to the floor.

They were up on their feet again in a flash, leaping back into the fight.

Neville incanted another combo; two jets of green and then yellow light flew out of his wand right for Moody. Harry had to throw up a shield when he realized that Moody had sent Neville's spells towards him. The blackness veiling his vision was really bothering him, and he had to strain extra hard to catch the lights, but at him they came--they knocked him back a couple of steps but died away as his shield took the brunt. "Stop second-guessing yourself Longbottom--!" Moody was shouting while Harry raised both arms above his head, aimed his wand blindly at the bookshelf he'd just crashed into and levitated it up and over...it hit its intended target against the wall right at Moody's back. Neville went to disarm their opponent, but Moody disappeared before the incantation even escaped his lips.

The boys whirled around, wands at the ready—Moody reappeared right behind Neville, grabbed the boy by the neck and shoved him in front of Harry's instantly thrown spell combo. Neville was hit by a jolt of electric shock and then his whole body went stiff as a board before he fell to the ground. "Ha! Whoops!" Moody disappeared again as an angry Harry freed his companion from his body bind. The fifth year whipped around to be met with chunks of the shattered bookshelf as they began flying towards him—he sent them crashing away whilst Neville tried to keep track of the disappearing Moody as more things came flying at them.

"How the bloody hell is he doing that?!" Neville growled, sending a book flying away from him across the room.

"I don't know—you can't Apparate on--!" Harry Transfigured a heavy book that he let slip past his banishing net into a flower just as Moody appeared again in front of him, seeming to pull something out of thin

air—the next thing the fifth year knew, there was a blade sitting inches from his throat and his wand had been banished clear across the room.

The real Mad Eye Moody seemed a bit crazier (in a menacing, unpredictably dangerous sort of way) than the fake one.

Harry peered at him through the darkness of the spell still affecting his vision, having gotten the point, and waited until the man lowered the weapon. Before their eyes, he did away with it—it Vanished and he summoned Harry's wand. Harry relaxed a little, taking a step back as Moody held his wand out to him. Silently, he took it. A couple of muttered incantations later and both boys were relieved of the nasty purple-bluish darkness that hindered them the entire fight. Harry had not even known that Neville was under the same affliction of sight.

"That wasn't fair..." Harry muttered under his breath, his cheeks hot with the sting of the loss. "I couldn't see and neither could Neville."

"No...it wasn't. But no Death Eater or beast or killer for hire you come up against will fight fair, boy." Moody waited until Harry met his eyes again before he continued, "That teaches you to be prepared for anything; to keep your guard up because something you trust to help you defend yourself--your vision--has been taken away from you. Hones your instincts, get it? Besides, how else was I to fool you into thinking I was Apparating if you could see properly?"

"What exactly does that spell do?" Neville asked curiously.

"Blinds you when I need you to be blind. When I move out of the direct path of light, you can't see me at all. Bet that wasn't in your book, now was it?"

Both boys shook their heads stupidly. There was a pause, and then the ex-Auror and Order Member turned to Harry.

"You see Potter..." Moody uttered gravely, though he was smiling sourly again. "There is a great deal more to dueling than simple diagrams in a book. This will be war—and in war you don't duel for fun, or to settle some childish score, boy." Harry felt his nostrils flaring

yet again at the memory of his affair with Malfoy on the pitch. Moody paused, his eye rolling over in Neville's direction briefly before landing on Harry again. "The wizard on the other side of the fight will more than likely be trying to kill you—you duel to keep from dying. Let that be your first lesson."

Harry heard these last words and he nodded slowly. Indeed...this was the kind of thing he needed to be learning. Neville looked as hungry for that knowledge as Harry felt. Moody holstered his wand and ran a hand through his damp hair; for he was perspiring a little from the exercise.

"Will you come back to one of our meetings? Can you teach the D.A. what you just did?" Harry asked as the gruff older wizard turned to walk from the Room.

Moody paused with his back to them, and turned just slightly, his magical eye observing the two young men. His scarred face looked damned menacing under the lamp light. "Keep reading that book. You've still got a hell of a lot to learn."

"But Neville's read the whole thing. Why can't you teach us?" Harry breathed, tingling all over with the kind of excitement he hadn't felt since he first picked up a broom, his loss to the older wizard now forgotten.

Moody turned again and continued his walk to the door. "You and Longbottom did pretty well, for kids. But you haven't mastered that Volume yet. Keep studying. When you've got the hang of that one, I'll come back."

"But there aren't any other volumes..." Neville piped up.

Moody didn't turn around. "Sure there are."

He left them standing there staring after him. Harry considered doing what he usually did—accepting that he would not get a straight answer from yet another frustratingly mysterious adult—but tonight he had been pushed around like that just a little too much. He decided

not to let Moody get away with it; not this time. He grabbed up his cloak and holstered his wand and ran after him. Neville followed, too.

“Hey! Hey, Moody come back here!”

He crossed the threshold of the Room, caught sight of Moody in his peripheral vision, and buckled under the intense pressure of a small bomb going off in his brain. He hit the ground on his knees hard and fell forward to the cold marble floor, his vision nearly gone from the terrible pain. Die! You—will—die--! Harry saw light beating against his eyesight; he heard the white noise, rolling, electric and deafening. His mouth oozed and he curled up into the fetal position on the smooth surface of the floor. Through the rolling noise there were echoes of Moody’s voice and Neville’s.

“Harry?” Neville knelt down beside his friend, reaching out cautiously as Moody ran back towards them, sliding to his knees and taking hold of the writhing boy. It looked as if he were having a seizure—it looked as if he was being put under the Torture Curse. His eyes were rolling back in his head and his face was twisted horribly in a mask of rage and pain. Two forces battled inside him, two voices pushed through his gritting teeth. Moody recognized Potter’s, and the other; the one using Potter to speak; he recognized too...

“Potter! Fight it, do you hear me? You fight!”

Harry was lifted into a pair of strong arms and shaken roughly. I am going to kill you...and after I kill you I will kill everyone who loves you, everyone you love! I am going to drink their blood, crush them and torture them, make them scream! You have cost me enough; you have hindered me ENOUGH! DIE! DIEEEEEE!!!

When Voldemort stopped shouting through Harry’s mouth, he took in rapid, short breaths and tried to climb up from the choking grip of his enemy in his mind. Breathe—be—still—find...Harry panted. Find—quiet—breathe! Get out...GET OUT!

“That’s right Potter...” Moody held the boy and looked into his struggling, sweaty face as they three crouched on the floor in the hallway near the wall. “You fight...” The dark corridor was empty but

for the three of them; throughout the castle there was quiet and all were oblivious to the silent war going on here. The space around them swelled and pushed outward from the boy wizard's balled-up frame—energy and magic filling up the atmosphere kinetically. The sphere of Harry's magic pulsed outward, inching wider and wider as he struggled. Moody and Neville shut their eyes as they were touched by this awesome force, and as the boy writhed in the older man's arms, Alastor came to a decision that would change the course of things to come, for them all.

Harry's breathing began to slow. His own voice became clearer as he grunted and guided himself up through the pain. He felt Voldemort squeezing the dear life out of him, willing him to die right there on the floor in Alastor Moody's arms. He did as he was told and he fought it with every ounce of strength or emotion or magic he had in him. The noise died down very slowly...the crushing grip of Voldemort's murderous fury began to recede. The sphere of magical energy created by this clashing of wills began to shrink as well. Darkness enveloped him, blotting out the throbbing light against his vision before Moody's battle-ravaged face appeared above him. His head feeling like a ripe melon, Harry's body slowly went limp and the rest of it slipped away. He felt nothing more. It was gone.

They all panted together; Neville from concern, Mad Eye from astonishment, and Harry from the ordeal.

Silence now. All of the torches lining the hall had gone out except one.

After a few minutes, Moody released Harry and the young man sat up slowly. He reached over and picked up his glasses that fell off from the floor, putting them back on his face. Moody stared at him, his face full of what looked like a renewed sense of purpose, before uttering hoarsely: "Potter, right now there is a gathering being called for." Harry sat still, calm and almost detached, listening as Moody's rough voice spelled out the future for him quietly. "There are people in the Order that do not agree with Dumbledore's treatment of you. They—we—believe something else must be done." A pause. "I was...on the fence...when I came here tonight. But after what I've just seen..."

They sat in silence again for a beat.

"I'm not worried about myself," Harry spoke, his heart thick with so much dread. "I just want Angelina and the others to be safe."

"They won't be safe Potter. Not ever as long as Voldemort is alive." Moody said gravely with Neville looking on and taking in every single word spoken. "There is a gathering; one of like minds with a common belief: that you must be taught to fight him. Mentally, physically, and with whatever it is that you have buried in there..."

He touched Harry's forehead lightly before standing up and offering a hand.

Harry took it and stood up too, along with Neville. "Who are these people, sir?"

"Professor McGonagall—it was her idea—and Remus Lupin; they called me here. Tonks is on board. There are others—some you know and some you don't."

"What about Dumbledore? He wanted me to learn Occlumency. But I can't...it's too late."

"Potter...if you leave it to us...you won't need Occlumency. That's the gist of what's going on here." He paused, looking at each boy's face, before touching Harry on the head. "You asked me if I would teach you...so did Minerva. Before just now I was going to turn you both down. Before I saw this I was going to side with Dumbledore; he thinks you're too young; he thinks you're not ready to begin the kind of training I'd put you through."

The young man closed his eyes...Dumbledore...why didn't he have any faith in Harry? Moody continued after a moment, causing Harry to open his eyes again as the heavy hand lifted from his damp ebony hair. Neville stood not breathing, staring at the two of them intensely; his round face shadowed with anticipation.

"But I don't think Voldemort cares how old you are—and the sooner you start the better. He's got his claws in you, there's no doubt about it, and if he finds out about this...thing..."

"My power..." Harry muttered, feeling a little woozy from the ordeal his poor head had just been through. "Can you help me? Can you help me learn to control it? So I can use it?"

Moody frowned thoughtfully. "I can try. But I warn you—it won't be easy Potter."

"I don't care. I want to do it."

"What about the D.A.?" Neville spoke finally, allowing himself to breathe. "Will you teach us as well?"

"I don't know that I could spare the energy, having two full-time apprentices along with my duties for the Order..."

Both Harry and Neville exchanged looks, and Neville whispered excitedly: "Two...?"

Another one of his gruff nods, and Moody smiled a little, his magical eye trained on Harry still while his real one observed Longbottom. "Hmm...tell you what: the both of you will train with me, and you pass on what I teach you to the D.A. That'll save me some time and energy."

"Oh wow...!" Neville's face lost all of its apprehension and he beamed at Harry, who gave a weary but enthusiastic smile in return. "Mr. Moody, sir you have no idea how much we appreciate it, right Harry?"

Harry nodded. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet; training with me ain't gonna be fun. There is more you need to know but I'm not the one to tell you. Wait, just a little bit longer. I promise you, you won't go unheard again Potter."

Moody told them to turn in, and Harry to be vigilant, before leaving them alone again. On the way back to the common room, Harry willed himself to feel better, forcing the wooziness from the attack to leave him as they walked and talked.

"We need to change some things about the D.A., Neville..."

"What do you mean?"

Harry frowned and shook his head slowly, watching his shoes take each step down to their floor. "I'm not quite sure yet...I need to think..."

"All right..." Just before they reached the Fat Lady's portrait, Harry stopped Neville and told him not to say anything to anyone about either Moody's visit or his attack. "I promise I won't."

Harry and Neville shook on it, and Harry promised to try and have something figured out before the next meeting. That settled, the two boys headed for bed.

They ran.

As fast as they could; through thick knots of foliage and trees and vines with branches slapping them in the face and beating them about their bodies. Harry and Angelina blasted the bushes and vines away with cutting and Reductor spells as they hauled ass through the forest. Oh Harry felt the wind in his hair, all right, but this wind came from his effort to avoid being torn limb from limb by a bloodthirsty giant.

And then Harry heard the fleeting, hollow whistle of an arrow flying past him. He looked, and through the blur of the trees they passed, he saw shadows thumping along with them. He saw eyes gleaming angry in their direction. He saw muscular arms being raised in the moonlight.

"Protego!" he erected a shield around Angelina as two arrows flew out of the darkness towards her chest and face. They fell to the ground and she faltered, stumbling to her knees. "Get up! Angelina, keep moving!"

He stooped to bring her to her feet again and as he did, three more arrows narrowly missed catching him in the skull and landed in a tree next to them. Harry hauled Angelina up and they continued on, the

sound of hoofs stomping against the forest floor closer and closer. “Why are they shooting arrows—ah!—at us?!” she screamed as they protected themselves from still more arrows that plunked sharp and deadly into the tree trunks around them. Harry let his broom go when he saw the clearing Hagrid used to teach sometimes ahead of them. Angelina saw it too and did the same.

“GO!” he bellowed, and they hopped onto their brooms just as they reached the clearing, angling up and away across the twenty five yard open space towards the black sky. Harry chanced a look down as he swerved to avoid another arrow flying up at him, and saw at least eight Centaurs jaunting into the clearing after them, looking angry as all hell. He never felt so confused or threatened coming out of this forest, not even when he and Ron had narrowly escaped being eaten by giant spiders.

“What the fuck—was that?” Angelina yelled behind her as they swung away towards the grounds.

“Hagrid has some bloody explaining to do!” Harry answered to the wind, and he wondered how much more in this year he could take. When there wasn’t an evil dark lord crawling into his brain and trying to kill him, there was a crazy Slytherin attacking his girlfriend, and now...there was a giant in the forest surrounded by once-neutral Centaurs who now seemed hell bent on killing something.

He guided them towards Hagrid’s cabin and they touched down.

Harry marched right up to the door and knocked hard, not caring if he woke anybody at all. Fang barked loudly and they could hear the beast scrambling towards the door. Harry knocked louder; harder. “Hagrid! Open up!”

“Shhh, not so loud!” hissed Angelina, looking around to see that the lights in the castle were still out.

“What in bleedin’ hippogriffs--?”

They could finally hear Hagrid’s annoyed voice behind the door, and a light blinked on through the curtained window near them. Harry

knocked a final few times, his lungs still on fire from the running and the panic of moments ago. Seconds later, the cabin door swung open and both students were bathed in light before being blocked by Hagrid's enormous frame. He looked a mess, and for once Harry could connect his abused appearance to the menace in the forest.

"Harry? Angelina? What're you two doin' up at this hour?" Asked the gamekeeper gruffly, wiping the slumber out of his puffy and bruised eyes.

"We've nearly been killed in the Forest," said Harry bluntly, vaguely aware that his tongue was still bleeding a little.

Hagrid's black eyes went wide and he stepped aside to let the two of them in. He sputtered something indistinct while closing the door and as Harry was pushed into an armchair by Fang, he finally got his words out. "Harry, what were you two doing in the forest?"

"We weren't in the forest at first," Angelina answered, leaning her broom against a wall. Harry saw in the firelight that she was glistening with sweat and that she had a gash on her forehead near the hairline. He didn't know how she got that. "We were flying. A giant knocked us out of the sky and tried to eat us."

More sputtering from Hagrid. "What?! B-But...oh no...really? Are you all right? Did he hurt ya?"

"We're fine," Harry assured him, gently pushing Fang away. "But what the hell is that thing doing here, Hagrid?"

Hagrid stood in the middle of the cabin, putting his hands on his hips and shaking his head. He closed his eyes, huffing as if on the verge of tears, before answering thickly: "He's me brother! I couldn't leave him in the mountains with those bloodthirsty--!"

"He's the bloodthirsty one," Angelina piped up resentfully. "Hagrid, if it weren't for those wards, he'd have torn us both apart!"

"But I've kept him restrained—McGongall's got good solid binds on that area, and why do ya think I haven't takin' ya any further into the forest than the clearing this year?"

"But, Hagrid--"

"He wouldn't harm ya; I've been talking to him, see. It's in his nature, that's all, he can't help himself!" Harry made a face, despite himself, at Hagrid's blubbering. His bruises took on an unpleasant, sticky gleam as the tears ran over them down his face and into his beard.

"That much was plain," Harry told him. "Firenze was right, Hagrid. I don't think you're making much headway. Talking to him doesn't seem to be working that well."

Hagrid honked his runny nose on a large handkerchief and waved a dismissive hand at them both. "Firenze an' those bloody Centaurs don't know what they're talkin' about! I put me life on the line to get my brother back here and I'm not givin' up on him just because they think he's some sort of monster!"

"But Hagrid...he is a monster!" Angelina whispered in disbelief. "Do you understand; he told us himself he thinks you're weak for being kind, and he admitted to enjoying the 'thrill of killing'!"

Hagrid blinked at her in disbelief for a moment, and Harry suppressed a groan. Angelina looked as if she realized perhaps she shouldn't have used those words exactly. "He...h-he said that? That he thinks I'm weak?"

"Um...uh...well, n-not exactly."

Harry stood up from the armchair, ushering Fang away from his crotch, and put a hand on Hagrid's massive shoulder. "You have to tell someone about this."

"I did...Professor McGonagall is pretty angry with me, but she said there's no way we can move him out now, not with so many students here. We'll hafta wait until the school year is over and try to remove him then...that's why she put the wards up. I had him bound in rope

before, but he kept breakin' through them. I had to get her involved..." his lip quivered and he began to wheeze with tears again. Harry patted him on the shoulder, standing slightly on the tips of his toes, until the fit passed. Angelina came over and offered her hand as well. Hagrid nodded his thanks, sniffed loudly, and gestured for the two of them to sit down. "Tea?"

"Sure..." Harry sat next to her at the little table near the window and they exchanged looks when Hagrid turned his back to set the kettle over the fire. "Can I ask..." he searched for a way to phrase the question first, "...did he do that to you? Or was it the Centaurs?"

Hagrid scoffed and poured them both steaming cups before filling his own big wooden goblet. "They gave me a pretty good tellin' off when Grawp first arrived. But they didn't lay hands on me till I tried ter help Firenze after Dumbledore asked him to teach you guys."

"Why are they so angry?" Angelina asked, sipping her tea gingerly.

Hagrid sank a towel into the hot water in the kettle and fished it out again. He pulled a little cup from his mantle and stuck his thick fingers inside. They watched, waiting for his answer, as he took out some fine rust-colored powder. It looked like herbs that he had grinded. He sprinkled it onto the steaming towel and sat it down in front of Angelina. "This'll mend that gash up fine, Angelina."

She took it, careful not to hurt herself from the heat, and pressed it to her forehead where she'd been cut. After a moment she nodded in relief, indicating that the medicine was working.

Hagrid sighed. "They're mad because they consider it a serious insult to their people, Firenze agreein' to help Dumbledore teach Divination. They believe their kind too great and noble and all that to go mixin' with uncivilized humans. Wizard folk they call us," he grunted. "After all I've done fer them! I've defended them time and again—this forest is a home to them and it remains so because of Dumbledore, but do they admit it, oh-ho no!"

"Why do you let your brother beat up on you like that, Hagrid?" Harry asked passionately, not liking it one bit.

"Well he doesn't know his own strength," the depressed gamekeeper sighed into his goblet. "He just gets mad, that's all. Sometimes I do get carried away when I'm tellin' him about things. I just want him to know what good people ya all are..."

They exchanged glances again, really feeling sorry for him then.

Harry and Angelina listened to Hagrid's side of things. He told them of how bringing Grawp into the forest might have been a mistake, and he could see now that it wasn't the place to try and convert a thirty-foot giant prone to killing at will to serve the Light. He hoped that McGonagall might help him find such a place, and he vehemently swore to them he wasn't going to give up. He said it was something he needed to do. Grawp was his family—the only family he had left. He had to do this. If he could get Grawp on their side, it would be something he had accomplished for the Light, for Dumbledore, and for his mother and father.

"The thoughtless killing ends here, I tell ya!" he proclaimed. "I'm gonna get Grawp to see some sense, so help me."

He asked them not to tell anybody about Grawp. Not even Ron and Hermione. Professor McGonagall wanted to keep things as quiet as possible, and besides them and Firenze she was the only person who knew about him. They reluctantly promised him that they wouldn't, though Harry decided he would talk to McGonagall himself later on. He didn't have the heart to tell Hagrid, but in his opinion Grawp needed to be sent back to the mountains as soon as the year was up. He was too dangerous to be trusted at all, and he didn't see any way of 'converting' him to the Light.

As the whole of Hogwarts' student body save three ate in the Great Hall, Draco Malfoy sat on his haunches in the Slytherin common room and let his father's words wash over him. He didn't speak, and his eyes narrowed past his father's face into his own thoughts...dread seized him, and defiance. He hardly knew what to do with these emotions as his father instructed him that he must put in harm's way the person he had so bizarrely come to...fall in love with...?

Yes. Draco's heart beat: yes-yes-yes-yes...I am in love with Angelina Johnson.

"Draco?" came his father's voice again, cutting across his thoughts mercilessly. "Are you listening to me, boy?"

"Yes sir..."

Draco's eyes focused on Lucius Malfoy's face again, bringing him back to reality. The elder Malfoy studied his son intensely before speaking again—his tone this time was low and deliberate and fierce. He spoke slowly; clearly. His tone this time told his son that this would be done, and there would be no mistakes, or there would be severe consequences. School time was over. Draco Malfoy was a Death Eater, now—a servant of the Dark Lord. There was no turning back.

"There is another Hogsmeade weekend at the end of your exams, correct?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now I have planned this very carefully with the others, but your part is key." Lucius paused, turning his head lightly as if listening for something (or someone), before bringing his gaze back to his pale and silent son. "McNair has told me he has reason to believe there is a giant hidden in the Forbidden Forest."

Draco started, his eyes going wide with fear and astonishment. "A giant? That's impossible!"

"There are many things that you have yet to learn, my ignorant son," Lucius admonished sternly, his brow creasing with disdain. "The giants might well prove to be our most important allies, along with the dragon riders we've been secretly rallying. This hasn't come easy—a lot of men died this winter. But that is not your concern at the moment."

Draco swallowed his fear and nodded shortly. "I'm sorry. A giant in the forest...go on."

"Yes. McNair suspected that oaf Hagrid left at roughly the same time he did for the mountains, and ended up there ahead. He didn't win their support for Dumbledore, but he did manage to bring one back."

"And you think it's hiding in the Forbidden Forest."

Lucius smiled patiently and Draco felt a pang of resentment. He wasn't stupid—surely his father could see that? He would have to prove it then. He would have to pay attention and get this done. Prove that he was no ignorant boy hanging from his father's coattails. He was a young man and he was capable! He sat up sill straighter in his sitting position and nodded gravely for Lucius to continue, the green flame flickering eerily across his porcelain face.

"Yes...probably trapped there, but Hagrid couldn't do it alone. I'm sure someone helped him by creating wards to keep the giant in—perhaps Dumbledore himself. But either way you'll need to watch the forest. Watch it for any strange comings and goings—anyone powerful enough to create wards around a giant."

"Like McGonagall or someone?"

"Yes. She is the most powerful here since the old man fled, but she might not have made them herself. You make it your duty to find out all you can, Draco. We need to know who created the wards so that we can know how to remove them as quickly and quietly as possible."

He explained quickly that if Dumbledore had created the wards, he would've used some sort of environmental magical source by pulling energy from the creatures living in the forest or even the trees surrounding the giant; or both. If someone like McGonagall, she would create runes, several of them, each serving a purpose: "...one to weaken the creature, one to silence his presence, one to disillusion him, several probably to close him in...each of these layered on top of the other, such is her method. Dumbledore is sentimental; he believes he is clever. McGonagall is cold and precise; methodical. We would have an easier time breaking through her more traditional wards than his; the old fool always has a trick under his sleeve." Draco didn't see how he would be able to recognize these things from

watching the ‘comings and goings’ in the forest. “You shall need to go into the forest, Draco, and you will be watching for that opportunity. Find the giant. Observe the area where it is hidden. If you see carvings on the trees...symbols...then it’s safe to say those are runes made by McGonagall or someone of her ilk.”

Draco’s heart sped up and thumped painfully in his chest at the thought. Go into the forest? With unseen, dangerous creatures, angry Centaurs, and a bloody giant?

Lucius continued, “If you question the giant, perhaps...”

“Question it?” the young man interrupted before he could stop himself. “Before or after it rips my head from my shoulders?”

“Courage, Draco...you cannot refuse this mission. They will be a lot harder down the line...showing weakness now will surely bring down the Dark Lord’s wrath.”

At these words, Draco blanched and closed his mouth. He was much more afraid of You-Know-Who than he was of a giant. He could run; he was fast and good at that. If the thing tried to have him he would run past the wards and not stop until he was safe beyond the threshold of the forest. “All right. Go into the forest, find the giant, and question it. Find out about the wards. I can do that.”

A wider smile from his father. “Good. We will need that giant free for this plan to work.”

“Free?” Draco tried not to let his voice tremble. “You want to release it?”

“Indeed--”Lucius paused, again turning to listen for some unseen interruption. After a longer moment than the last one, he turned back to his son and began to speak more urgently. “On Hogsmeade weekend, once your exams are over, everyone will glad in the much-needed break from school. The night before, you shall assist a few fellow Death Eaters in gaining entry to the grounds.”

Draco licked his lips and nodded, hanging on his father’s every word.

"The next morning, I'm sure Potter and his friends will rise early to escape the castle for the village below. You watch them; you make sure you know where they end up once they are inside. The girl, Angelina should be with them. Do you understand?"

"Yes..." Draco's fists began to clench on their own. He squeezed them tight until the blood flooded out of his knuckles. "The giant is meant as a distraction."

"Exactly." Lucius' smile now held no disdain or impatience. He looked at his son with the smallest hint of pride, but it was enough. "You will bring her to me, and Potter will follow you...his lust for that tramp will drive him towards us blindly, and we'll be waiting for him."

"But father...what if there is no giant?"

"McNair is almost completely positive that there is one...but if by some chance there isn't we shall have to regroup."

There was a slight pause, and then: "She isn't a tramp..." Draco, despite himself, allowed the words to fall ever-so-quietly out of his mouth as he lowered his gaze to his knees, his fists clenched to pain. He felt conflicted by the need to prove himself to his father and the overwhelming sense of affection churning inside him for Angelina.

"I beg your pardon?" uttered elder Malfoy forbiddingly, the proud smile vanishing.

"Angelina—she isn't..." Draco faltered, and his father chuckled, causing the boy's eyes to rise to meet his.

"Ahhh...I see. So Severus was right, then. You have developed feelings for that girl, haven't you son?"

"What do you mean, 'Severus was right'?"

Lucius glared at Draco for a beat before answering, "I hate to twist the dagger, Draco, but your 'feelings' for Angelina Johnson are no more than a mere side-effect of the potion I gave you."

"The potion you lied to me about?!" Draco raised his voice, his chest heaving with defiance. Lucius did not react in anger, but his eyes swam with some kind of emotion the young man hadn't yet seen in his father.

Lucius nodded. "Yes...I lied to you. And I tortured you. And the potion I gave you...has poisoned your mind...tricked you into thinking that you feel something for her that isn't real."

"It is real...I...I love her."

"You do not!" The green flames surged for a moment, making Malfoy's face seem explosively menacing as he berated his son. "You must do away with childhood fancy and become a man in this war, do you understand me Draco? I have toiled tirelessly—I have suffered with my own guilt over what I did to you, but it was for your own good! I will not see you die from weakness!"

Draco's own eyes grew wide with anger—he was furious. He shook with rage, his skin bleaching white as his blood went cold. When he spoke, he spoke with spine...perhaps for the first time in his young life...for this small moment he was genuinely unafraid of the man whose head was sitting in his common room fireplace.

"I am not weak. You saw to that, didn't you? So now you've built me up, I will do anything you ask. Are you happy? Father..." slowly he unclenched his fists as he glared at his father, his eyes dampening with angry tears, "...are you satisfied?"

"You'll bring her to me..." the man seemed to be asking rather than telling. "As I've planned."

"I'll deliver you Potter. I'll make you proud."

"That's all I ask..." Lucius opened his mouth to say more, but he stopped and turned for a third time to listen. After a second he shook his head and cursed under his breath. "I must go; I've run out of time. I will contact you again, though I don't know when--"

"Go..." Lucius hesitated, but only received a cold stare from his son, before disappearing from the fireplace. The green flames died away as Draco turned his back on them. He stood staring into the darkness surrounding him, grimacing at nothing, feeling consumed with anger. What, now, he asked himself. And he parted his lips in answer: "You'll go down into the forest like he told you, and you'll find out about those runes...and Potter will get what he deserves."

And Angelina? Draco knew what to do with her...

Chapter 39 Prepare Yourselves

Part I of II

Harry ran his fingers along the iron bars until he found his cloak.

Angelina kept her eyes on the forest edge and her wand at the ready, squinting into the darkness for any signs of the centaurs. She thought she could feel them watching her and Harry...or was it just paranoia from the attack? Her senses picked up movement and malice slinking through the trees...hooves thumping softly on the forest floor just beyond where her eyesight reached...she shuddered as Harry turned around and held out a hand for hers.

They covered themselves with the cloak and walked slowly back up the path leading to the castle. As done before, they walked in silence. Harry breathed into Angelina's hair whilst they made their way through the deserted halls, his mind preoccupied and his limbs tired. When they reached the common room, he stepped from under the cloak and immediately set to pacing across the hearthrug, his head down and his brow drawn in agitation or concentration or both. Angelina tugged on the cloak, letting it slide off of her head and shoulders, slowly revealing herself to the room.

He looked up at her briefly, but said nothing. He looked as if he were turning something over and over in his mind; seriously debating this thing with himself; and though they didn't speak right away the air in the room seemed to echo the silence back at her as though he was shouting.

"Harry, what is it?" she asked in her familiarly wary tone.

He shook his head at his Chucks, biting his lower lip. "Nothing, I'm just--bloody--pissed off about Hagrid..." His frown grew deeper, angrier.

"You look like you want to do something," she began carefully, recognizing all the symptoms from the experience of the whole Malfoy disaster, "but McGonagall already knows and I think we should let her handle--"

"Yeah sure, she knows, but what is she doing about it?" Harry said crossly, sounding fed up. Angelina sighed with patience as he continued to pace in front of the empty, dark fireplace. "What is anyone doing about it?"

"She put wards up--" she started, but he cut her off again.

"I mean, what if Hagrid never got a chance to ask McGonagall for help? What if Grawp seriously injured him worse than he's already done--or killed him!--and escaped from the forest? Do you think McGonagall would be able to take that thing on by herself? What if the Order members can't get here in time to help her if something like that happens? And the centaurs...they clearly dislike wizards, especially now we've got Firenze. But even if we didn't, they still don't care if we're students here or not. Not to mention, Angelina, that there are Death Eaters escaped from Azkaban on the loose right now!"

"There are other teachers, Harry. Look, tonight was scary, yeah all right, but--" He gave her a forbidding look and took a sharp breath, clearly trying to keep hold of his patience. Angelina walked closer to him, looking into his eyes, and placed her hands on him to stop his pacing.

He clenched his jaw at her, at first not meeting her gaze. It became clear when he finally did, however, that she was not going to let him continue his ranting. Harry sighed; the touch seemed to do its job, settling him somewhat.

"Slow down, will you? I'm just as upset as you are, but you cannot take on everything; you cannot defend everyone; right every wrong—you have to let other people handle their own problems and you deal with yours."

Harry finally paused his angry thought process for these last words, and he nodded at her slowly, his brow and jaw gradually relaxing. He took her hands in his. Looking down at her fingers, he nodded again; settling something silently before saying faintly: "Yeah, about that...I meant what I said today," he began carefully, the words and the meanings behind them becoming real to him as he spoke. "Neither

you or Ron or Hermione can help me figure out what is happening to me." Angelina frowned, opening her mouth to protest on instinct, but he cut her off with a flicker of his green eyes and a short shake of his head. "But I've found someone who can."

"Who...?"

"Alastor Moody came to the castle tonight. He's going to train Neville and me."

"Alastor Moody is going to train you?" Angelina's eyes grew wide with envy. "In what?"

"Well, I figure since he used to train Aurors, it'll be stuff along the same line. He also promised to help me try to control myself--he saw what I can do tonight. I don't know when we'll begin, but I hope soon."

"Wow, Harry. That's really good news." Angelina kissed him softly on the lips and pulled back frowning faintly. "But...why Neville as well?"

Harry started to explain about Neville's secret training. She listened, eventually sitting down on an ottoman and looking at the floor as he knelt in front of her with his hands on her legs. He went on telling her that he understood completely now—seeing the giant and hearing its words about how it hated listening to Hagrid talk of Dumbledore and the Light made him realize something.

"There is no 'if something happens' anymore, Angelina. Something is going to happen; something is already happening. There are dark forces out there gathering against Dumbledore, there are things going on that we can't see...and sooner or later they're going to show up on our doorstep, especially with Dumbledore gone. Don't you remember what McGonagall said? With him gone the 'future for Hogwarts is grim indeed'?" He saw her features shifting into gradual acceptance of what he was saying to her and he pressed on. "You said that you would be there for me...and I..." Harry swallowed thickly, "I think I finally know what I want. I'm tired of talking." He stood up from his kneeling position and began pacing in front of her yet again. "The DA started out just wanting a place to do practical spell work; instead of reading those useless textbooks, we wanted to prepare ourselves for

our exams since Umbridge wasn't going to do it...but now it's about more than just practice, you see? I said those things at the DA meeting the night I found out about Malfoy because I was angry or whatever, I know, but that doesn't make it any less true."

Again he paused to gauge her reaction.

Angelina closed her eyes and sighed deeply. Of course she knew what he was getting at. She wasn't stupid. He had declared this before, when he told the DA that kids or not, they would eventually (perhaps sooner than they allowed themselves to believe) have to take up arms. Angelina sat and allowed the reality of the inevitable future wash over her. She had been studying for her N.E.W.T. all year. Tools...tools she had soaked up throughout her years at Hogwarts were one after the other clicking in line like a rolling index as she sat there. The sense of accomplishment she felt at being involved with the DA; perfecting her defensive magic and working with the other kids...it was fun, even with the drama of Draco Malfoy plaguing them most of the time. But what Harry was proposing now...it was serious. And she could appreciate it. The threat of the giant; this one encounter in the Forbidden Forest tonight; seemed to have made up Harry's mind about a course of action that to him not only seemed practical but vital. And he was right—earlier as they stood holding each other at the gates to the pitch, she did tell him that she trusted him and would support him from now on. It would make no sense to go back on that before at least hearing him out.

"All right," she said evenly, "what are you thinking about doing, then?"

Harry nodded in the direction of the dorms behind her, determination now creasing his brow in the dark. "Let's wake the others."

Hours before Harry and Angelina were introduced to Grawp; just after what he witnessed in the hall outside the Room of Requirement; Alastor Moody limped heavily into Minerva McGonagall's classroom and closed the door behind him.

Inside, solemn figures stood or sat arguing heatedly in hushed voices among themselves in the dimly lit space. They didn't seem to notice his arrival as he advanced on them; even with his heavy wooden leg thumping against the hard wood floor under his weight as he

maneuvered the desks scattered about the room. He came to a halt just outside the pool of light emanating from the single oil lamp positioned on Minerva's desk and stood there listening to them silently with his hands folded behind his back.

All of them; Elphias Doge, Hestia Jones, Rubeus Hagrid, Remus Lupin, Nymphadora Tonks, and Alastor himself had been called there by Minerva McGonagall for one purpose only: Harry Potter.

Indeed, the fifteen-year-old wizard was the main topic of this current argument. It seemed, since the time Alastor left to find the boy with Neville Longbottom in the Room of Requirement, that little progress had been made in determining whether or not Potter truly possessed some sort of special quality that was worthy of their precious spare time and attention. A quality that was worth them going against Albus Dumbledore's wishes. A quality that would make him a key part in the fight against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

"I'm telling you, Minerva and I have both witnessed it," Remus Lupin was saying somewhat passionately to Hestia Jones, who still wore the same expression of skepticism now as she had when Alastor left a little over an hour before. "It's wandless magic that, quite frankly, I have never seen in a wizard this young."

"Well it sounds to me like he had a bloody episode of some sort." Elphias Doge replied sharply. The Order Member and former Auror turned Head Obliviator uncrossed his arms and stood up from his sitting position on one of the desktops. "Like the boy is funny in the head or..."

"N'wait just a minute; you take tha' back! Harry is not 'funny' in the--!" Hagrid piped up, his girth shifting desks noisily as he stepped further into the pool of light aggressively.

"Hagrid..." Professor McGonagall interrupted him with closed eyes; a sure sign that her patience and nerves for this argument were reaching their limit. "No one here is suggesting that Potter is funny in the head; sit down will you?"

Grudgingly, Hagrid grumbled in apology and backed up again, settling his great bottom into a chair that creaked and groaned under his weight before Minerva flicked her wand at it so that it grew twice in size as he sat there. He eyed Elphias resentfully for a moment more before sighing heavily into his bushy black beard. “I’ve always had eh feelin’ Harry was summat special...” he muttered quietly, the bruises and cuts on his face glistening eerily in the lamp light. “But...do yeh really think he stands a chance against You-Know-Who?”

“Not at the present moment, no...” Minerva answered him. She was standing behind her desk, her hands resting lightly on the surface, surveying them all grimly. “That is why I’ve asked all of you here. He’ll need training...he’ll need your guidance and your help.”

“And what exactly would you have us teach the boy?” Hestia Jones; an Auror and new Order member; spoke up, folding her arms across her chest.

“Everything...”

Everyone turned to see Alastor standing there just beyond the light, and he stepped forward somewhat dramatically into it, his magical eye a luminous electric blue as it roamed from face to face in turn before settling on Hestia again.

She narrowed her own sky blue eyes at him and scoffed softly. “Everything...? And when do you plan to do that? Between his Charms class and his Potions lesson?”

Alastor did not seem affected at all by her way of speaking; instead he stood calmly and shrugged as if it should be obvious. “No, I would begin in the summer. That’s one of the things we’ll need clever Tonks, here for. Dumbledore explained to us Potter needs to remain with his muggle family until he’s of age for the protective magic on that house they live in, but that’s no place to train a wizard.”

“Well, what would you need me for, exactly?” Tonks asked without the skepticism Hestia seemed to exude.

"The way I figure it," Alastor began, squinting at Tonks, "anyone looking to harm Potter while he's staying with the muggles would wait and watch to see when they could get him in a vulnerable position. If he leaves, they'll be ready to strike while he's beyond the wards." He offered a coarse smile. "But if he's there all the time, they can't get to him."

"Ah..." Tonks nodded with understanding. "I'm to be a decoy while he's away training with you, then."

"...if you're up to it. I won't pretend spending all that time with muggles like those will be challenge-free."

Before Tonks could offer a word of agreement or protest, Minerva asked: "So you will train him?"

Before answering, Alastor pulled his flask from an inside pocket of his worn leather duster and uncapped it, taking a deep swig of the stuff inside. He coughed harshly and backed up to lean against one of the student desks behind him. The shadows from the dim light deepened the scars in his hard face, and he nodded slowly. "After what I've just seen, I can't turn you down, or him for that matter."

"That is good news, Alastor, thank you," said the headmistress, relieved. "Now if the rest of you are on board, we can move on to the next part, which will be convincing Albus--"

"I still don't see what is so wrong with the way Dumbledore was doing things," Elphias protested, his silver chin stubble catching the lamp light. "Listen to yourself, Minerva, m'dear. Ancient magic? From Merlin times? Potter's only a knobby-kneed kid—his place is with his face in a book not getting his every whim catered to by the likes of us. We've been in this fight since before he was in his poor mother's belly, rest her soul..."

"Elphias, Potter is way more than just a kid; that much I can guarantee you right now," Alastor corrected him. "I saw what Minerva's been talking about with my own eyes tonight. This damned thing nearly jumped out of my skull," he pointed to his magical eye and scoffed bitterly. "And I've seen it before...when we first met in

that little muggle house...it's brilliant stuff, whatever he's got trapped in there. When it breaks free I won't want to be anywhere near it."

"What happened when you found him?" Remus asked; his eyes looked more wolf-like now in the light of the lamp on Minerva's desk—yellow and shining for a split second before he moved slightly. Alastor took a hard sigh and tucked his flask back into his pocket. Everyone remained quiet and allowed him to recount what he had experienced with Harry in the seventh floor hallway without interruption.

"Knock me over with a feather..." breathed Hagrid, his mouth hanging open slightly. "Harry an' You-Know-Who connected like...like tha'? Why, tha' could've killed the poor lad if he hadn't managed teh..." the enormous half-giant clamped his mouth shut and shook his head fervently as if willing himself not to say it or even think it.

No one else spoke for a while. Minerva took this opportunity to convey to them the importance of her intentions. "Listen to me, all of you." She surveyed them silently for a moment, making sure she had their undivided attention before continuing. "What we are doing will divide the Order, there's no question of it," she explained carefully, "but understand this is my choice, and if anyone would bear the consequences, it would be me. I only wish to take with me those who will stand behind me and support Potter, but if you feel it would be a betrayal of Dumbledore, speak now."

There was silence. None seemed sure of their doubts now, after hearing what Alastor had to say. The only person who seemed as if he would resist was Hagrid, despite his obvious shock and worry over what he'd just heard about Harry and Voldemort's connection. He shifted around in his oversized chair, clearly torn between his gratitude for Minerva's help with Grawp, his love of Harry, and his extreme loyalty to Dumbledore. "I just...I can't figure how to square this in me own head, tha's all..." he muttered, avoiding everyone's eyes.

"You would really feel more comfortable excluding yourself, Hagrid?" asked Remus carefully. "Knowing what a dangerous position Harry is in right now? I understand that you wish to remain loyal to

Dumbledore, we all do, but it isn't merely a question of loyalty anymore."

Hagrid paused, but shook his head resolutely. Alastor smiled and asserted that they all respected Dumbledore, and that they wouldn't serve him in the Order if they did not. Hagrid squared his shoulders in a gesture that said he had made up his mind. "You're right, Remus. Count me in."

With both Hagrid and Alastor firmly on board, Minerva looked to the others now. "Does that settle it for everyone else, then? Are you with us or no?"

Both Tonks and Remus spoke up at once: "We're with you..." and for a moment it seemed they alone would join Alastor, Hagrid, and Minerva. Hestia and Elphias exchanged looks and Hestia nodded without speaking that she was in. Elphias muttered 'let's get on with it, then,' and the matter was settled. Minerva thanked them all for their support and wasted no time impressing upon them how hard it had been for her to come to the decision to do what she was planning.

"At the risk of sounding like some sort of mutinous naysayer," Minerva told them, "I have made it my unpleasant job to wrest the authority over Potter's wellbeing from Albus, but I do not do this frivolously. He has let his deep affection for the boy interfere with his judgment," the lot of them merely sat and listened, all of them meeting her eyes, as she continued, "and it isn't just that. Albus has shown blatant favoritism with Severus as well. Through the years, I trusted that he had his own reasons and hoped that all was for the best, but now I simply cannot go on blindly following his lead when I can see plainly that Severus is on the verge of betraying us all." She paused; shaking her head to suppress the angry outburst she so wanted to let forth.

It was very upsetting; what she was doing--going against her leader and friend in something that everyone knew was dear to his heart. But that was why she knew she had to interfere. This time was critical. They couldn't afford to spoil this chance at determining if what Harry had been marked with fourteen years ago could help them. She cared for Harry Potter, too, but she could never lose focus when there was

so much at stake and to Minerva that was the difference between her and Albus Dumbledore. It was a hard thing: recognizing where the man she respected, admired, and loved was failing. He could be totally reasonable, and see that he was fighting a losing battle with this Occlumency business; especially with Severus Snape as his champion of the art; or he could become furious and truly see her dissent as a betrayal of the meanest kind. He might leave her no choice but to go completely against him, and that was something she did not want to do. It was enough that there was this rift among them; any turbulent feelings of anger or betrayal could fracture them to the point of weakness, and an Order of the Phoenix completely divided would be no good when the time came for war. That time was drawing ever nearer; as Albus hastened his journey across the globe to put the word out, Minerva felt it her job to stay here and strengthen the fort.

She had been thinking on this for days and days, even before Albus was forced out of Hogwarts. Frequently, even in her dreams, she heard the echoes of her first conversation with him about Harry Potter's incredible feat that Halloween night. 'Did you see it Minerva?' he asked her as they retreated from Number Four, Privet Drive. His eyes beneath those ever-present half-moon spectacles shown brightly with awe and even a hint of excitement, though his brow was creased with worry as he nearly whispered to her, 'such light...it's burning deep beneath the surface...did you see it?'

She had seen it. It was magic. It was old magic—the kind of magic that, unbeknownst to Minerva, Voldemort had spoken of in the cemetery the night of his return; the kind of magic that had not been seen for centuries; that kind of earth-shattering force of nature that began the evolution of wizard kind in the very beginning...and all contained in a tiny boy protected by his mother's sacrifice from his enemy's fatal blow.

No one else had known of this until now; she and Albus kept it the secret of secrets. They had watched Harry grow, and thought perhaps they had been mistaken about what they'd seen, but now...so unexpectedly...it had finally broken through. Now that she'd glimpsed it for herself, and Harry had become fully aware of it, it no longer seemed right to try and stifle it as Dumbledore was doing. The

time had come to crack open the surface and let the burning light spill out. Let it scorch the bitter hell out of the black-hearted Lord Voldemort.

"The one thing Voldemort has shown us since the very beginning is that he perceives Harry Potter as a serious threat. He may even be afraid of the boy—that is something we should use. And it is something that we must not ignore: fear of him or hatred of him has driven Voldemort to go to great lengths to murder Harry. We cannot let that happen."

"Who can argue with you so passionate about this, Minerva, m'dear?" Elphias' voice was less strident than it had been before now as he addressed her, "I can only say I hope you're right. I know he's Dumbledore's favorite—he's Lilly and James' son and their deaths were horrible and he survived the Killing Curse and all that, but...it still may turn out that he's just a boy...just a normal wizard like any of us..."

"I told you already, Doge, what he's got isn't normal, by any means," Alastor cut in before Minerva could answer, "and even without whatever the hell it is, he's still a tough one, that Potter. He pays attention, and he can fight, too. He's got confidence. He's a little sloppier than his friend Longbottom but--"

"Neville Longbottom?" Tonks spoke up; her eyebrows rose curiously. Alastor nodded. "He was asking me questions about my Auror training in class today. Well, all the students were, but his seemed more informed. He wanted to know about center meditation; so did Harry."

"Hmm..." the ex-Auror grunted affirmatively. "Well it looks like Dumbledore provided Mister Longbottom with one of the duel manuals from his own collection, that crafty old coot. Don't know why he intended for the boy to have it, but he's made good use of it."

Minerva frowned and leaned forward to place her palms on her desk. "Albus gave Neville Longbottom a manual from his collection and not Harry?"

"Seems so..." Alastor confirmed without much concern. He paused, clearing his throat, before continuing simply: "I decided to take him on as well as Potter."

"Two apprentices? Ha!" Elphias chuckled heartily. "Moody we agreed to train Potter, and last I checked he's one boy, not two. You can't take on two apprentices at your bloody age, anyway! Who are you trying to impress, mate?"

"Well I'm impressed..." Hestia muttered, staring at Alastor appraisingly.

Alastor's bitter smile appeared again on his scarred face as he looked at Elphias. "Doge, there was a time when I had fifty Aurors under my belt; your nephew was one of them, so don't think I can't take on two kids! If you don't feel up to it, though, leave it to me."

"I don't understand...Neville Longbottom...?" said Minerva quietly, looking surprised and thoughtful. She recovered quickly, shaking her head with a forbidding look in her eyes. "Alastor...I asked you to train Harry because his life is in danger...he is threatened directly by Voldemort, that is why I called all of you here. This magic of his; we must make sure he is prepared to handle it; to wield it and use it to protect himself--"

"You mean you want him to learn to use it so that we can use him, Minerva, don't mince words," he corrected her. "And you're right—Potter is in danger. I'm not disagreeing with you there. But you weren't there with them, and I can't explain my reasons any better than to say I want them both under me; it's that simple. Why not train them both? Why not train the lot of them?"

"I beg your pardon?" Minerva stood upright, her eyebrows raised. "What do you mean, 'the lot of them'?"

"I've also agreed to let them take what they learn with me back to that DA of theirs."

Remus exchanged glances with Minerva. "Me as well," Tonks added, and she stood up and met her headmistress' stern gaze. "I

agreed to set aside some time once we're finished with O.W.L. lessons to talk about Auror stuff...just..." she cleared her throat uncertainly, "you know, whatever they wanted to learn."

"Nymphadora, I didn't ask you to teach here so that you could fill the children's heads with the delusion that they'd stand any chance against the rogues in Voldemort's employ, nor Alastor did I ask you to train anyone but Potter--" the eldest witch started reproachfully but Alastor cut her off.

"Minerva, correct me if I'm wrong, but I thought you were in favor of what they were doing?"

"Yes, when it was clear that Delores Umbridge had been sent to interfere with their education," she replied evenly. "The woman was sabotaging this institution and at the time any resistance to her bone-headed way of thinking was good news to me, but--"

"But now things are different. We need to take some things into consideration, while we're all here talking about training." Alastor stood upright from his leaning position against the desk, getting serious now. "We need to start considering what we're going to do about numbers." Minerva's eyes went wide and she blanched at his words, but she was not given the chance to interrupt as he went on: "Just like our Nymphadora was at one time, there is a fine batch of young wizards about to graduate at year's end. We need to think about early recruitment."

Hagrid gasped, looking upset again. "But they're just kids! I mean, it's bad enough that Harry's so in over his head; isn't it a little too early teh be thinkin' abou'--?"

"Now hold on, Hagrid, nobody's saying we'd chuck them into battle straight out of the front gates!" Elphias spoke in agreement with Alastor for the first time since they'd been there.

"Hagrid, I understand you feel uncomfortable discussing this; I know you care a lot about these kids, and I appreciate that." Alastor tried to reassure him. "But we're faced with a very harsh reality now: soon

this war will begin. It will only take one occurrence; one message or offensive action on their side; then the lines will be drawn in the sand.”

“And you think filling up our side with freshly-graduated rookies is wise, do you?” Hestia asked zealously, unconvinced. “They’ll be lambs to the slaughter, Moody. Oh no doubt, they’ll join—by the dozens perhaps. With their youth and passion, they’ll be absolutely convinced that fighting for what is good and right is as noble an undertaking as they come, but within a year they’d all be dead.”

This grim reality settled over them as Alastor allowed Hestia to have her say before he retorted. “I don’t think anyone here is suggesting that we feed Voldemort young wizards like little lamb chops, dear Hestia...” Hestia bristled for a second before the scarred older wizard smiled ruefully at her. “On the contrary—I’d be aiming for exactly the opposite.”

Hagrid looked confused. “So what are yeh sayin’ then?”

“How many Death Eaters do you think will come out of that batch of graduating ‘lambs’?” Alastor asked them. “Do you think Voldemort gives a damn how old they are, as long as he can use them to gain more power?” No one could give him an answer to that one and Hagrid turned a funny shade of white beneath his bruised, battered face. “Dumbledore is gone, Minerva. How long do you think before that blackguard Voldemort gets the ambition to storm this place based on that fact alone? We will of course see to it these walls are protected—but with this DA idea, I think Potter is onto something...”

“Forgive me for saying so, professor, but I agree with him,” Tonks added, ignoring Remus’ slight frown. “There are kids here; sons and daughters of suspected Death Eaters. It may be a little extreme to say, but we shouldn’t discount the possibility that they’re already being recruited by their own families.”

“Draco Malfoy...” Minerva spoke in almost a whisper, turning from the desk and taking a few steps until she stood by herself at the edge of the pool of light. She frowned into the darkness at a table leg, reaching with her wand tip to touch her lips thoughtfully. “He presents

such a possibility. His father, according to Severus, has already begun it. And he did something...terrible...to one of the other students. I should expel him, but I'll have to handle it with care. I want nothing more than to punish that little scoundrel for what he did, but to lose Severus over it...I'm not convinced the Order could stand the blow right now at such a crucial stage."

Hestia grunted under her breath, her pale eyes shining with disdain. She did not like Severus Snape, and did not trust him farther than she could throw him. "Are you sure we haven't already lost him?"

"No..." Minerva answered truthfully.

"Perhaps Dumbledore was right on that score," ventured Remus carefully, drawing everyone's gaze to him. "It hardly seems that forcing Severus' hand will work. Expelling Draco now would only drive him away."

"What should I do, then? Allow him to try this foolish attempt to convert the boy?"

Hestia looked cross, and as usual Elphias offered a grunt but said nothing. Hagrid sat looking confused, his bushy eyebrows shifting up and down as he glanced from one weary face to the other. "Convert'? Wait a mo'...are you saying that the young Malfoy is a...he's a...?" He lowered his voice and leaned in as though his next words were too scandalous to say aloud, "Death Eater?"

"No, Hagrid," replied Remus, though after a pause he added grimly, "at least...not yet. The problem is that Severus foolishly believes he can alter the course of that boy's future when we all know his father's word in that household is law." Remus shook his head in frustration. "Minerva, I would be all for you taking a firm hand with him, but you have to decide how much we value his service to the Order. Obviously Dumbledore understands how important Severus' role is in all this."

"That's the thing, isn't it? If Severus were merely a Potions teacher interfering with his favorite student's discipline, I would toss Malfoy out on his scrawny little arse without a second's hesitation!" Both

Hestia and Elphias suppressed smirks at Minerva's outburst, but it was Alastor who spoke next.

"I'm no fan of the professor's..." he began in a hoarse murmur, "but I'm inclined to believe there is something more substantial at work here than Snape's militancy. Why is he so hard-set on this? He doesn't seem like the 'fatherly' type at all, does he? There must be a reason...one none of us would ever know about unless he opened his mouth to confess, and that ain't gonna happen any time soon I'll bet."

"Something like what?" asked Hestia.

"Dunno for certain. I do know that Dumbledore may be a sentimental old man, but he's no fool. I know we're all here to follow your lead on this, Minerva, but don't forget Dumbledore has been a mentor to Severus Snape since he was a student here. Have you considered there is something he knows about Severus' present situation that we do not?"

"I've done more than consider; Albus told me as much whenever I've voiced my concerns about Professor Snape. He always made it clear that there was an ironclad reason, but what, he would never say. Whatever it is," Minerva added purposefully, "now's the time to reveal it, don't you think?"

No one spoke in answer.

It was getting late; both Hestia and Elphias had to report back to the Ministry and Hagrid needed to get back to check on his brother before he turned in. Minerva thanked them all for coming and they agreed to meet again as soon as she had word from Dumbledore. Minerva and Alastor argued some more about his intention to train Neville Longbottom. Though she didn't outright condemn Alastor's thoughts on the DA, she didn't exactly support them either. "This school is supposed to be a safe haven away from the dangerous things that are enveloping the world, Alastor," she argued as Hestia and Elphias left them. "Vigilance is one thing, but we can't ask our children to fight our war for us..."

"It isn't just our war, Minerva," he insisted. "The only reason the last one ended when it did was because of Potter, but this time...this time Voldemort won't be stopped nearly as easily. This one will take years, and many of us will die. When you're gone and I'm gone and the witches and wizards of our generation are all exhausted and dying off one by one trying to beat back his advances, who do you think will come to their rescue?"

When he said this, Minerva had a fleeting vision of Harry Potter leading an army of baby-faced Hogwarts students onto a field of awaiting Death Eaters and bloodthirsty beasts of all varieties; marching his classmates over the carnage Voldemort's followers left in their wake; marching them straight to their deaths. She looked up at him, her brow furrowing and real fear clear in her eyes for the first time.

"Do you think I'm doing the right thing?" she whispered. "I understand now how hard this is for Albus—the boy is so young! I only want him to be prepared for what could happen."

Alastor took her by the shoulders firmly, both eyes fixed on hers. "It'll be time for war again soon, Minerva, and the apathy of youth is a luxury most of these kids won't be able to afford; especially not Harry Potter."

He gave her thin shoulders a final encouraging squeeze and nodded goodnight to Tonks and Remus. They all watched him go, and then Minerva collected herself, sighing resolutely. "Nymphadora," the young Auror raised her head, her blonde hair falling into her eye, "I need you to do something for me."

"Anything professor."

"Keep a watchful eye on Draco Malfoy until I decide what is to be done with him," the elder witch instructed.

"Yes ma'am, will do..." Tonks turned her head and nodded to Remus, that shock of hair hiding her eye again, before bidding them both goodnight.

When Tonks had disappeared from the classroom, Remus closed his eyes briefly and blew out a long stream of breath.

"That went well," he replied in an amused whisper, taking the two steps down from the platform where the chalkboard stood. "Dumbledore will marvel at our ability to work together, won't he?"

Minerva scoffed at his tone, but did not attempt to disagree. "Yes well despite appearances I do think we're on the same page, for the most part--or at least the part that really matters, and that's Potter."

Remus paused, taking one of the hems of his shabby cloak between his fingers to fiddle with idly. "What do you think he'll do?" he asked her quietly, and she let the question hang in the air between them.

Seconds later, almost as an answer to him, a flash of scarlet flame ignited over Minerva's desk and when it was gone a single phoenix feather with a small scroll of parchment attached to it floated down toward the dark wood surface.

Minerva reached out and snatched it away before it landed. Remus strode forward, stopping just on the opposite side from her. Silence enveloped them as she slowly unfurled the parchment. Remus recognized Albus Dumbledore's handwriting immediately, even from his point of view. She read the letter silently then handed it over to him, her expression unreadable. The clock on her wall ticked steadily as he took it from her, but otherwise all was quiet.

Remus' eyes swept across the parchment and he whispered the words as they went.

My dearest Minerva,

I am glad that you wrote to me, although it would be dishonest to say that I hadn't anticipated our opinions about Harry would eventually be at odds. It is unfortunate that we find ourselves in this position and there are many things I wish to say on the subject, but time is short and I find myself with precious little of it to spare these days.

Suffice it to say that you are quite correct: Severus should not have revealed the secret of Harry's connection to Voldemort, and I did not instruct him to do so. I hasten to add, however, that from your account of events, it would appear that he was given little choice.

The question remains: does that excuse him? Absolutely not, and this must be made clear to him.

However... and I'll say this again, hopefully for the last time: Severus Snape has my complete confidence; in truth I trust him with my life. He is a flawed man, and I have done my utmost to guide him through the worst of those flaws. Obviously, some of my efforts have proven more successful than others, but as I have said to you on many occasions, it is my firm belief that he will not betray us—indeed that he cannot.

As for the impact of Severus' mistake on the measures we have undertaken to protect Harry, consider this: it is my belief that Voldemort was already aware of Harry's close connection to him—from as far back as the time of the attack on Arthur Weasley—and has been determined since then to use the connection to his advantage. Even so, this concerns me less than the possibility that through such a connection Voldemort might eventually discover Harry's unique power. My intention in having Harry learn Occlumency from Severus was to prevent this—to inhibit subconscious contact between them lest Voldemort find a means to manipulate this power to harm Harry. But after months with little to no progress, I must regretfully conclude that my plan has failed.

As much faith as I have in him, I do not believe that Harry's temperament makes him a suitable candidate for mastering Occlumency, and it has become clear that his power—coupled with the connection to Voldemort—has a volatile affect on his emotions that can remove them from his direct control completely. It is also quite plain to me that relying on Severus to discover a means around this impediment is no longer a viable option.

The question then becomes: what is best for Harry now?

As I am away—and will remain so for an indefinite amount of time—it is incumbent upon me to relinquish this decision to you, for you are the best and only person I trust to make it. You mentioned your intention to take more radical measures than I was willing to in this regard. Combat training, you've indicated, should be your first priority. So be it. I previously feared that Harry was unready for such a step, but since my plan has met its demise I cannot fault you for moving ahead with your own. Our methods may differ drastically, but I believe our goal is the same: to keep Harry alive and safe and to see him through what is sure to be a very dangerous and difficult time. If you meet with more success than I have, I will find myself with no cause for acrimony on that count.

Indeed...I anticipated your unease with regards to our disaccord, and I must tell you that I would expect nothing less from you than to challenge me as vigorously as you thought it necessary if you truly believed me wrong. I care for Harry a great deal more than I was ready to admit before, and this is why I find myself giving his care over to you.

I will contact you again—I hope to speak about this in person as soon as we can manage it. Ah, and it seems I've run out of time to fill you in on my progress abroad! Until our next correspondence, then...

I remain gratefully yours,

Albus Dumbledore

Remus read over the letter twice before rolling it up again and handing it back to Minerva. His lined, fatigued face did not look relieved, but skeptical. "It can't have gone that smoothly..." They stood in silence for a long moment before she sat down at her desk again and sighed.

"He's trying to hide how angry he really is..." she paused, clutching the letter tightly, "...even for him, this was exceptionally agreeable. Though I don't think he is angry with me as much as he is with Severus."

Remus frowned, his eyes falling to the letter again for a second. "You think he's sent a separate letter to Severus?"

"Of course," Minerva stood from her desk, picking the lamp up and carrying it with her around to where Remus stood, the letter still clutched in her other hand, "I'm going to speak with him first thing."

"That would be advisable," he agreed. Together they walked along the rows of desks until they disappeared through the classroom door. Minerva escorted Remus to the Grand Entrance Hall, where she unlocked the great oak doors for him. He fastened his traveling cloak around his lean shoulders and ran a hand through his graying hair, his weary eyes squinting out over the still and silent grounds. "I have...spent a long time wondering what good use I really am to anyone at all..." he began very quietly.

She stood inside the doorway, watching him with the lantern raised so that the warm light spilled across their faces.

"I failed Lilly and James all those years ago, and I failed Sirius when he would've had the chance to be free if I hadn't..." he trailed off, smiling very sadly. Minerva did not speak; she seemed transfixed by his forlornness. "Professor McGonagall..." his voice held a strong trace of the quiet, bookish boy she used to teach, "I can't fail Harry too. If I...if I can help him now; be of some use finally—teach him everything I know, anything at all he wants to learn...then it would be as if I were making it up to Lilly and James and Sirius..."

"Remus, you don't look well," was her reply, and she returned his sad smile. "Go home and get some rest. We'll speak again soon."

"Goodnight."

Much later that night, five extremely sleepy Gryffindors were seated in various spots around the hearth in the dark common room watching Harry pace back and forth before them. Ginny, Hermione, Ron, Dean, and Neville had been dragged from their beds by Harry and Angelina a few minutes before and had grouped together here in various states of grogginess.

Ron, who sat between Hermione and Ginny on the couch with his head leaned back against the cushion, yawned loudly several times and closed his eyes, awaiting Harry's explanation. Naturally Hermione had a look of concern furrowing her brow, though her eyes were just as tired as everyone else's. Dean sat forward on Ginny's other side with his chin in his hands and his eyelids slipping up and down as he struggled to stay awake while Neville—the most alert-looking of the five—sat in an armchair adjacent to the rest of them frowning slightly; his brown eyes shining with anticipation. Angelina stood by a window, her arms folded, watching Harry as he rolled his wand around and around between his fingers and paced; his head down, his eyes unfocused and thoughtful.

Ginny yawned and stretched extravagantly, flopping back against the velvet couch cushions like Ron and fixing Harry with an expectant look. "Not that this isn't really fascinating Harry--watching you pace like that and all--but do you mind telling us why you and Angelina dragged us out of bed at this ungodly hour? Tomorrow is match day, in case you've forgotten."

"Don't worry about that," Angelina told her. "We can make energy draughts; I got the recipe from Fred."

Harry spared Ginny one appraising glance and paced a few times more before stopping abruptly as though forcing himself to turn and face them. "Okay," he exhaled sharply, "I want to try and do something...something that might sound a little..." Harry paused, his eyes finding Angelina's, before setting his jaw and starting over. "Dumbledore's away and it's likely he won't be able to come back for a long time, especially with Fudge gunning for him."

"Yes, we know that," Ginny replied somewhat unconcernedly.

"And you also realize the school isn't as safe with him gone, do you?"

Ginny blinked and lifted her head, frowning at his tone. Hermione's concerned expression intensified, but she said nothing--and though Ron was no longer sleeping, he remained with his head leaned back, staring at the ceiling. "What are you getting at, Harry?" Hermione asked quietly.

"I mean to do something about that," Harry said simply, "and I'll need your help."

"So now you want our help..." muttered Ron, still blinking at the ceiling. Harry didn't reply; there was a considerable silence that blanketed them all for a moment before Ron lifted his head to look at his best friend, his blue eyes narrowed. "You didn't seem too keen on our input earlier today," he continued very quietly. "I remember you telling us to stay out of it. Hermione remembers, too. After all, you were hardest on her even though she's done nothing but try to help you from day one."

"Ron..." Hermione touched his arm, and he said nothing else. Everyone waited.

"This is different. This isn't about me; it's about the DA and Hogwarts. I'm not taking back what I said earlier." Harry's tone was resolute, but not aggressive. "I'm sorry for being so hard on you guys, but I needed to make myself clear."

"Well, you did make yourself clear, didn't you?" Ron spoke up a little more, leaning forward. "You didn't talk to us all day; all you did was hang 'round with Neville. Is he your best mate, now?"

Neville lowered his gaze to his hands, but not before his eyes flickered between Harry's face and Ron's with kind of a surprised yet almost hopeful gleam. Harry sighed at the bitterness in Ron's voice and cast about for a way to explain himself without scaring them. They were his friends, and he cared about them all, but none of them seemed to understand him—they just couldn't get past that he would rather distance himself from them on some issues for their own good and his peace of mind. How could he make them see where he was coming from? He was excited about his idea, but it seemed that he would scarcely get to share this excitement with them until they could see things the way he did. He had to be firm; he had to hold his resolve. Hopefully, as Angelina had, they would see that he was right and support him.

"Listen; Ron, I'm sorry about today. I really am. But I am not going to talk about Occlumency anymore with any of you and that's all there is to it." Ron opened his mouth to cut in, but Harry continued over him, actually smiling. "There is something I'm dying to tell you guys, though. Something I absolutely need your help with. I can't do it without you guys, and it needs to get done. It's just as important, maybe more."

"Hang on..." Dean yawned and raised his hand as though he were in class. "First off: what the hell is Occlumency? And second: what happened to your glasses, Harry?"

Hermione and Ginny perked up, now seemingly just noticing that Harry's glasses were cracked. In fact, the lot of them seemed more alert and awake now that Dean had mentioned it; they were now taking in Harry and Angelina's appearances shrewdly for the first time since they'd been dragged down to the common room. Hermione reached out for Harry's spectacles and he took them off; handing them to her silently. She examined them for a beat before repairing them with her wand that she'd tucked in her hair (much like Luna Lovegood was prone to do, but no one mentioned this). Upon handing them back to Harry, she asked: "You're both dressed. Where have you been all night?"

"We went flying," Angelina answered matter-of-factly.

"But you're all dirty, Angelina," Ginny replied.

"That's because we went into the Forest."

"At this time of night?" Hermione chimed in. "Why? The centaurs..."

"Oh, we had a run-in with them," Harry answered her, "but we didn't go in there by choice."

Everyone looked at them with bewildered and curious expressions overpowering the grogginess from before. Even Ron, despite his sullen demeanor, raised an eyebrow at the grass stains on Angelina's white nightgown and the dirt caking the rims of her Quidditch boots. "So...what happened?" he asked cautiously.

She looked to Harry first, who nodded for her to go on, before shrugging. “We were almost eaten by a giant.”

There was a collective gasp of disbelief and excitement. Ginny and Hermione exchanged astonished glances and Dean sat bolt upright, his sleepiness completely gone. “Wicked!”

“Wait...” Neville threw a puzzled look at Harry. “There’s a giant in the Forbidden Forest? Since when?”

“Since Hagrid came back,” Harry explained. “That’s why he’s been looking so terrible all year. It’s his half-brother and it’s a mean one.”

“I can’t believe I was right...” Ron whispered; his eyes wide. “I was just joking around when I told Hagrid he looked like he got into a fight with one. And here he actually did!” Harry was glad to see the other boy smiling again. Ron turned to him, the excited smile now spreading across his face. “You know I’ve never met a giant in person before. Charlie swears he’s done, but I think he’s full of it. What was it like?”

“What was it like?” Hermione scolded, aghast. “Terrifying would be a good guess! Giants are ruthless killers. If you ask me, they’re worse than trolls. I read that they really enjoy murdering—almost for sport. Oh Harry, Angelina, you two were very lucky to escape!”

“I think we’re aware of that, Hermione,” Harry assured her, smiling despite her seriousness. Having survived the ordeal, however, he felt owed a little whimsical reflection. He remembered something and hushed all of there excited inquiries with raised hands. “Wait, guys, we can’t tell anybody. It has to stay between us—no one is supposed to know except Hagrid and Professor McGonagall. You have to keep it secret, all right?”

“How can we keep this a secret?” Hermione persisted, still looking cross. “I mean...doesn’t Professor McGonagall realize how dangerous it is to have that thing so close to school grounds? What if some unsuspecting first years go wandering in there by themselves and run into it?”

"They'll have to get past that mob of centaurs first..." Dean muttered, trying to suppress a smirk.

Ginny and Ron snorted but Hermione rounded on them, her eyes narrowed to slits and her cheeks bright pink. "It's not funny!" she snapped. "If Harry and Angelina had been killed tonight, you three wouldn't be so amused, would you? This is serious."

"You're right, it is." Harry interjected as Ron opened his mouth to give a feeble retort. "McGonagall put wards up, and it's lucky she did because I think they were what saved me and Angelina tonight, to be honest." Hermione put her hand to her mouth and shook her head. "Hagrid said she's going to send Grawp away at year's end, and I believe she will, but the very fact that a giant is even in the Forest—just the experience of almost getting squashed to bits by one—it made me really understand something tonight."

Hermione whimpered at the 'squashed to bits' remark and Ginny made a face at the name Grawp. Harry continued.

"Ginny—you were right for naming us the DA." Ginny almost smiled proudly, but thought better of it, registering Harry's now no-nonsense expression. "But that's not really what we've been up till now. I want to change that."

They all looked at him in silence for a full minute. Neville and Angelina were the only ones who seemed to really understand what he was on about. "So this was what you meant, Harry?" Neville asked now. "When you said earlier that you wanted to change some things?"

Everyone turned their gazes to Neville as Harry nodded. "Uh huh, but it won't be easy. We've got to really work together if we're going to pull off what I have in mind--"

"What exactly is it that you have in mind?" Hermione asked, looking unreceptive.

Harry sighed deeply, steeling himself against the resistance he knew he would receive, especially from her. "I want Dumbledore's Army to actually become an army..." he paused and she blinked slowly at him. "...for Hogwarts."

Before Hermione opened her mouth in protest as Harry expected her to, Angelina caught his eye again with a slow smile.
It was match day.

Harry didn't sleep. He spent the night until dawn going over his ideas with his friends in the common room, and when they all finally begged him to let them return to their beds, he stayed up thinking. For several hours now, he'd been in a place where fatigue simply dropped away and he was just awake—watching the pink-hued sun creep towards him over the net of trees in the distance. He watched the treetops carefully as the dawn progressed to full-blown morning, remembering that afternoon in the library when he saw a flock of birds fleeing for their lives.

Angelina had insisted that she stay up with him, but soon was curled up on the couch with her head laying awkwardly on the cushy crimson armrest; her hair falling into her eyes. Her chest rose and fell slowly as she took deep, rhythmic breaths. Harry turned away from the window and watched the shifting sunlight rove across the soft skin of her face. Looking from her sleeping form over to the nearest study table where sheets of parchment were scattered about—all scribbled on by Hermione, Angelina, and Neville during the wee hours of the morning as everyone brainstormed—Harry felt a tremendous sense of calm.

That strong awareness of the here and now stole over him again as it had twice before, but this time he did not feel the ominous gut-emptying sense of doom he had those other times. This visceral consciousness of the present was simply the pause in between the agitation he felt last night and the cool determination that was taking him over in the first sunny hours of match day.

Match day...Slytherin and Gryffindor would go head to head today for the Quidditch Cup. When the match was over, if everyone heeded the

message on their fake Galleons that Hermione had bewitched, a DA meeting would take place.

Harry walked over to the table and began gathering the scattered parchment. He stacked it neatly and rolled it, sealing it with his wand. He would stow it in his trunk for now. He knew that in a little while kids would start wandering down into the common room to pass through for breakfast, and he didn't want anyone outside the six people he'd spent the night with laying their eyes on the pages. Angelina made a small noise and shifted on the couch, but remained asleep. Harry turned to look down at her just as his eyes caught sight of something in the corner of his field of vision. He looked up and saw Voldemort standing stone still near the stairs to the boys' dormitories.

Harry's heart gave a lurch, but he did not recoil in surprise or fear. He knew, somehow, that this wasn't real. The figure of Voldemort stood as a statue, staring at him with burning red eyes and a cold smile, draped in black. Harry closed his eyes and opened them again. The figure was gone. Parting his lips slightly, Harry breathed in and whispered to himself, "...dreaming on my feet...wake up Harry..."

"Hmm?" Even though his whisper was scarcely audible, somehow Angelina had heard it and was now unfurling her long limbs like a cat, stretching and smiling sleepily up at him. "When did you wake up?"

Harry shook his head, still staring at the corner where the Voldemort vision had been standing. "I didn't sleep."

Angelina frowned, her eyes moving from his face to that corner and back, before rising to her knees on the couch with her hands on the armrest. She faced him, her height matching his, blocking his view. "Why not? Are you nervous about today?"

He looked at her finally. "No, I'm sure you guys will win."

"I meant the meeting. Hermione's lecturing hasn't changed your mind, has it?"

Rather than answer her, Harry reached up and cupped her face in his hands. He leaned in and touched his lips to hers, kissing her tenderly

and slowly, his chest swelling with warmth. After a second he deepened the kiss, holding onto her face as she pressed herself against him as much as she could with the armrest between them. When they broke apart he smiled at her. "Hermione can never scold me for long. She always folds, eventually. It just takes longer some times than others."

"I did not fold, I was simply too tired to continue arguing my points, which were all very valid, thank you."

Both looked up to see Hermione and Ginny descending the stairs. The two of them looked exhausted but they were dressed for the day. Ginny was already in her Quidditch gear; Hermione had her scarlet and gold spirit pin secured to her jacket, carrying a same-colored noisemaker. Almost as though their presence had signaled the morning rush, several other Gryffindors began to emerge in the girls' wake, all of them heading to breakfast early so they could be down at the pitch for first pick of the better seats. A big cluster of second year boys skipped down the stairs excitedly, a couple even twirling their noisemakers and drawing a scowl from Ginny.

"Oh no, I'm running late." Angelina slipped from Harry's embrace and stood up from the couch. "Grab me a muffin or something, will you Ginny? I'm going straight to the pitch after my shower—and tell the others they've got twenty minutes!"

When she was gone up the stairs, Ginny yawned deeply and threw herself into an armchair. "I can't keep my eyes open."

"Me either..." Hermione agreed, her own yawn taking her over.

"Why didn't you two take the energy draught we made?" Harry asked, stowing the roll of parchment in his back jeans pocket.

"We did. It hasn't taken affect yet..." Ginny muttered.

Hermione squinted at him skeptically. "Didn't you sleep at all?" He saw the questions gathering in her face and eyes, and before she could speak again he held his hand up for silence and moved away from her towards the stairs after Angelina.

"I'm fine, Hermione, I just need a shower. See you at breakfast."

He left them and went to fetch a towel from his room upstairs. The other boys were all dragging themselves through their morning tasks with a pitiful air of fatigue about them (all except Seamus, who hadn't been invited last night) when he entered. It seemed that the draught they made was indeed too weak to take effect straight away. Neville, though tired, seemed excited. He grinned at Harry as he pulled his shirt down over his head. Ron was slapping himself in the face to inspire some form of wakefulness when Harry left again for the showers.

The steamy, humid room was full of boys by now; all of whom were loudly discussing the more memorable moments of the Gryffindor Quidditch season. Harry thought he heard his name once or twice, and figured his colossal cock-up at the beginning of the season during that sham of a practice drill was the topic in those cases. As he walked through to the very last stall near the huge, fogged up windows on the far wall, Harry frowned to himself. That day seemed like so long ago—the days and weeks and months that followed it were so full and had changed so much in Harry's life that the practice drill could've belonged to another boy's memory altogether.

"Shame you're not playing in this one, Harry," Lee Jordan greeted him as he turned on the water; Harry nodded distractedly and closed the shower curtain.

Under the spray, Harry closed his eyes and could not help seeing Voldemort staring at him again. He turned around in a circle where he stood as the hot water ran down over his head and face and body, wrapping him in a steamy cocoon. Spitting water out of his mouth, Harry shook the image away; water flew from the tips of his hair onto the slippery tiles. He could not hold his eyes open with such relaxing warmth cradling him so, and now his sleepless night was catching up with him as he stood with his head bowed under the shower nozzle and his eyes shut tight. The sounds of the rushing water and his housemates' boisterous talk began to echo in his ears and then gradually fade away as the sound of his own breathing surrounded him completely.

He was no longer standing in a shower stall, but a chilly, empty darkness.

He started walking...through the darkness, and into the corridor of torches. Everything must be carefully planned...Harry walked on past several solid black doors towards the one directly in front of him with the promising light spilling through its frame. There cannot be any mistakes, none...with a kind of fiery excitement burning deep within him, Harry reached out and pushed the door open. He moved through several rooms with blurry speed so that he could not make out what was in them, the excitement growing very powerful as he pressed on. My patience has run out. I must hear it...I must or a painful death awaits the next person who fails me...

The rows upon rows of glittering orbs passed him dreamlike, until at last he came to the one he was searching for. He turned, slowing down now, the burning anticipation engulfing him head to foot. He walked along the aisle with his wand drawn. Breathing in the scent of dust, Harry licked his lips hungrily. He was nearing a shadow—a figure. This person was standing just ahead of him, his back turned so that Harry could not see who it was. But even as he drew closer to the person, his eyes took in details that quickly revealed an identity. The worn-in trainers, the faded jeans, the familiarly oversized shirt...and the messy hair as black as crows' feathers...

Harry knew who it was before the boy started to turn. The realization saturated him just as the excitement had moments before, but as the pale, sweaty face and the green eyes came into view he didn't scream out or step back in shock. He felt hatred pierce his heart as his gaze fell on that rise of pink flesh forming a bolt of lightening—he felt pure loathing running along his skin like creepy crawling things and his grip on the wand in his thin hand tightened so he felt he might snap the thing in two.

Snarling, Harry parted his lips. 'So...'he uttered in the unmistakable voice of Voldemort as the Boy Who Lived stood frozen with fright before him, 'when the trap is set...when I've heard every single word...you, my young fool, shall die at last...'

Positively brimming with almost gleeful satisfaction, Harry raised his wand and flicked his wrist. The boy's own wand flew out of his grip and clattered to the floor. The green eyes darted away into the shadows in search of it, but another flick of Harry's wrist and the boy was curled up on the floor writhing in pain, screaming his lungs out. His voice cracked awfully as he wailed in agony, but Harry only savored the terrible sound, lifting his chin and letting it wash over him as though he were appreciating a symphony. Then abruptly, Harry stopped the Torture Curse and glared down at the boy who had somehow managed to escape death all those years ago. Not being able to stand looking at the life in those eyes a second longer, Harry growled 'Avada Kedavra!'

Brilliant emerald light ignited within his vision and seconds later the water and steam and sunlight came rushing back. Harry found his own voice and it bellowed in anger. "No--ARGH!" Blindly, he threw his fist into the slippery tile and felt the bones in his hand shatter in an explosion of pain. The impact knocked him back against the wall behind him as he drew his aching fist to himself.

Harry opened his eyes and saw blood running down the wall where he'd crushed a fist-sized hole into its surface. There were startled voices coming to him from beyond his shower stall, but he ignored them as he snatched his towel from its hanging spot and wrapped it hastily around himself. Not stopping to turn off the water, Harry held his bleeding hand to his chest and walked out into the shower room. The blurry figures of boys in various states of undress hovered around him as he marched past them all with his head down and his scar throbbing intensely.

Thankfully, the roommates had all gone down for breakfast by the time he reached the dorm.

His fist was shaking with pain as he padded soaking wet through the room towards his night stand, where he had left his wand and spectacles. Harry reached down with his good hand, his towel pooling around his ankles as he released it, and picked up his glasses. He put them on, biting his lip hard at the pain. Retrieving his wand, Harry aimed it at his bleeding knuckles. Remembering the spell Hermione

had used to mend his broken arm once, he muttered, “Emendo Ossis...”

A few seconds passed and a warm light caressed his injury, melting the pain away until Harry closed his eyes and breathed out slowly with relief. The blood disappeared and the bits of broken tile stuck to his skin flaked off; Harry flexed his hand to make sure he'd performed the spell properly. It was healed, but his anger and nerves were still thriving. He reached down and picked up his towel again after a moment, securely wrapping it around himself.

It wasn't real—this much he knew. He could hardly have killed himself. The young, troubled wizard stood half-naked and wet at his bedside, frowning deeply as the scar on his forehead burned with pain. It was something else, then. “Everything must be carefully planned...” he whispered to himself, staring intently at the little wooden animal sitting next to his wand holster on the table surface. “The trap is set...” Harry shook his head and made a face, trying to remember. “No, when the trap is set. I said—he said—‘when’.”

So Voldemort was planning a trap for him. Planning to lure him to the Department of Mysteries. Planning to kill him, after...what? The shelf with the orb—the orb of light. It was special, it was important to Voldemort, who'd been thinking about it and obsessed with it for months now. He had been furious with Harry last night for getting Lucius Malfoy in trouble with the Ministry. Because...because Lucius must have been leading the effort to trap Harry. And now he was on the run—the clever Lucius who had managed to smuggle Tom Riddle's diary into Hogwarts and who had collaborated with Delores Umbridge to send dementors after Harry last summer.

Harry heard voices outside the dorm—kids going down into the common room, talking excitedly, twirling noise-makers, chanting ‘Go, Go Gryffindor’ to themselves. Today was match day. There would be noise and vigor and House pride abound today—yet Harry stood on the outside of it all.

Making a decision, he dressed quickly and left the dorm. People threw him looks as he jogged down the stairs into the common room. A few boys (no doubt ones who'd been present in the showers)

whispered among themselves or with other people as Harry walked purposefully through the growing crowd of Gryffindors for the portrait hole. He thought he heard someone call his name, but he could not stop.

He needed to see Professor McGonagall.

Minerva stood in the Head's office for the first time since Dumbledore's escape four nights ago.

And, for the longest time, she simply stood there; her gaze remained fixed on the grounds through one of the large windows as the sun rose kissing the grass, the lake surface, and finally the stone walls of the castle itself. She followed Filch with her eyes as he made his way down the hill to Hagrid's cabin. She watched them talk for a bit, and then the two set off towards the Quidditch pitch to prepare for the day's match.

Today was the last match day of the year. She was wearing her House colors; topped off with a bright gold feather in her hat. Despite all that was changing, today she would remain the same old Professor McGonagall whose House spirit was indestructible.

Minerva held her hands folded tightly at her waist, every now and again rubbing them together absentmindedly. Behind her, Fawkes' perch stood unoccupied and the many portraits of headmasters past slept quietly. The clock ticked against the silence, counting the seconds until the person she was expecting would arrive. In her head, she focused on the words of Dumbledore's letter as she waited; even hearing his voice as though he were sitting right behind her at his desk speaking to her about her visitor in a soft, serious tone.

"He has my complete confidence, Minerva," he would say. Perhaps smile a bit and tip his head forward, staring at her over his spectacles with those shining blue eyes of his. "In truth...I trust him with my life..."

She sighed deeply and shook her head at her own reflection in the window. "You once said the same thing about me, Albus. But you're angry with the both of us, aren't you? Do you still trust us both so

completely, now that so much of what you had planned has gone awry?"

She was met with silence. Minerva lowered her eyes away from the horizon and turned to face the room. The headmasters' portraits slept on; the Sorting Hat sat still; the various instruments on tables surrounding her clinked and whirred quietly. The clock ticked on...counting the seconds...

There was a faint knock on the door.

Minerva stared at the desk for a second more, then braced herself and cleared her throat. "Come in, Severus."

It seemed as though the sunlight rejected him on principle—shadow followed him as he emerged dressed, as always, in black. The only spot of color was the emerald and silver band embossed with the Slytherin avatar that he wore around his arm to support his House team. He looked tired and a measure more ill-tempered than usual, despite the high spirits that would soon be filling the castle today. Closing the door behind him, Severus walked into the office and stood in the center of the room, his arms folded across his chest, waiting. He didn't speak.

Minerva moved away from the window and walked around behind the desk, her hands still clasped together. She watched Severus avoid her gaze for a moment—he acknowledged the magnificent sunrise she'd been admiring before he entered.

"You received a letter from Albus last night?" Severus turned his dark eyes towards her again as she broke the silence. He nodded; the gesture was a very slight inclination of his head. She took a deep breath, her suspicions having been confirmed, and moved on in a calm voice. "He informed you, then, that he's turned Potter over to me, and I am to decide now what should be done with him?"

"Yes he did," Severus smirked darkly, "among other things..." His voice hardened quite a bit, and Minerva took note of it before continuing.

"I asked you here to give you a chance to be with us. Despite what you may think, I do value your input..."

He raised an eyebrow at her, his jaw clenching just a bit. "As you may recall, Minerva, I have been 'with you' for seventeen years now. I don't think there is anyone in the Order of the Phoenix who can claim to have risked more than I for our cause, with the exception of Dumbledore."

"Just answer the question, Severus."

He considered her.

"I'm loyal to Dumbledore, you know that," came his curt response. "In fact, I remove myself from anything further to do with Potter unless it relates to his abysmal performance in my Potions course. I won't be a part of this...nursery school, rogue faction headed by...prehistoric ex-Aurors? Rookie Order members? And, oh yes, let's not forget unqualified substitute teachers."

She stared at him, not particularly surprised at his reaction; especially not his spiteful mention of Nymphadora's appointment to his coveted Defense Against the Dark Arts post. "Well I do commend your loyalty to Dumbledore, Severus. Especially since you were unable to persuade him to let you pursue your own 'nursery school' campaign any further."

He looked at her sharply, his eyes flashing, but only pressed his lips together tightly. Obviously he'd had no intention of telling her this, and the fact that she had sense enough to realize it already irritated him. She raised her eyebrows in mock surprise, an insightful glint peeking at him from behind her spectacles.

"Oh don't tell me you're still going through with it? Even against Albus' wishes...?" Several of the portraits surrounding them opened their eyes slyly and peered down at the scene. "Do you still, Severus, intend to reveal yourself to Draco Malfoy after we've all warned you of the dangers in doing so?"

"You think I'm a fool..." he gritted, shaking his head so his slick hair fell into his dark eyes, "isn't that right Headmistress?" She didn't answer him, but he could see by the look on her face that he wasn't far off. He gave a cynical scoff. "Of course; seventeen years of loyal service to the Order, and still none of you can bring yourselves to trust me. You'll question every move I make, yet no one believes it foolish to try and train Potter to fight the Dark Lord--removing him from Dumbledore's protection in order to liberate a dangerous power the boy has no control over and that could very well get us all killed? How can you help him tame it when you don't even understand how it works?"

"He will learn to control it," she replied matter-of-factly. "Potter has supporters who actually have his best interest at heart, you see, not just our own selfish agendas. Unlike you, none of us see fit to assault him on a daily basis with petty complaints against his deceased parents."

"And what do you call writing to Dumbledore about me as if I were some petulant child--that wasn't 'petty' at all, I suppose?"

"I won't apologize for trying to force you to see sense, Severus."

The Potions Master gave a faint snarl, turning away from her to watch the morning skyline grow still brighter. He waited for a long time before returning to the argument. "That's just as well, isn't it? I never expected any of you to understand—I knew you would all rally against me, and so you have. Quite efficiently, I might add..." his lips twitched into a smirk as he continued in tones so low she could barely hear him over the instruments and the clock. "You've only reinforced my determination with your narrow-minded assumptions about me and my intentions. None of you would ever dream that there is more to what I am doing than what you've so cleverly deemed 'petty' defiance."

She ignored his sarcasm. "What is there, then? Tell me the truth; tell me now."

With those words, he suddenly seemed stricken with a deep need to confess something—to let a heavy secret slip from his burdened

shoulders—but only for the tiniest moment. It passed so quickly she wasn't even sure it had really been there before the cold arrogance seeped back into his pallid features again. “I can see continuing this argument will gain me nothing.” Severus shrugged with an impressive show of indifference. “You've obviously made up your mind. If there isn't anything else, Headmistress, the match will be starting soon...”

He didn't wait for her to respond, but turned on the spot and strode towards the door. She closed her eyes and sighed, a little disappointed despite herself. She had always wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt even when others sought to condemn his attitude toward the world. She did so because of Albus' absolute confidence in him. This morning, though, she suspected that confidence had taken a considerable blow. She called out to him before he could escape her. “Severus, wait.”

Crushing his eyes shut at the sound of her voice, Severus halted and turned to face her again. “Yes?”

“I'm sending him to Durmstrang.”

For the first time, Severus looked shocked. “I beg your pardon?” he uttered, staring at her in actual disbelief.

“You heard me.” Minerva answered him heatedly. “Most would call me crazy not to expel him outright. I had restrained myself before because I was concerned you would abandon and betray us if I didn't keep that boy safely here at Hogwarts to terrorize whoever catches his fancy, but not anymore!”

“Oh for Merlin's sake, that isn't fair and you know it! Potter has broken so many rules since he came here I can't bloody keep count, and he was in his right mind for all of them! I'm telling you that Draco was under mental and physical stress when he did what he did, but you won't even hear of it, will you?” He stood fuming near the door; the nostrils in his large, crooked nose flared in anger as he balled his fists at his sides. “Dumbledore trusts me, but now that's he's gone suddenly my word isn't good enough for you? What do you want from me?”

"I want you to tell me why you are willing to risk destroying years of hard work and bloodshed so recklessly, Severus! Something happened; something is driving you away from us...does it have anything to do with what Potter said last night about the boy's m--?"

"That is none of your concern!" The Potions Master snapped, losing his cool completely. "Whatever choices I made; whatever sacrifices I made before I began my life in service to the Order of the Phoenix shall never be spoken of again by me to anyone! Threatening me won't do any--!"

Suddenly there was a hard, urgent series of rapping against the office door, and both teachers turned to glare at it in surprise. "Professor McGonagall?"

Harry Potter's determined voice sounded from behind it, causing them both to snap their heads towards each other again; their gazes met in understanding and with a clenched jaw Severus briskly turned again to the door. He opened it and Potter came rushing in, almost not noticing the man robed in black standing before him.

"Professor, I need to talk to you, it's important--" He stopped dead in his tracks, breathing hard, a deep look of loathing etched into his young face upon sight of Severus Snape. "Oh..." said the boy heavily, the crease in his brow growing in definition as he and Severus glared at each other. "I'm sorry; I didn't know you were here."

He didn't sound sorry at all.

"You are interrupting a private conversation, Potter." Severus gritted stonily, adopting a stiff, rebuking posture as Harry looked from his unpleasant face to Minerva's angry one. "Whatever it is you've come to complain about can wait."

Harry did not respond to Severus directly; he turned to Minerva and walked a little closer to the Head's desk, leaving his Potions professor behind at the door in furious silence. "Actually, it can't wait, professor. It's really important that we talk about it, now, please."

Minerva gave Harry a very shrewd look. "You had another dream, didn't you?"

"Yes..." he answered carefully, his eyes narrowing in realization. He had expected her to be surprised that he would burst in on her like this; taken aback when he confessed that he hadn't been telling the whole truth about mastering Occlumency. It seemed that she had not been fooled at all, however, by his angry assertion the night before. Behind him, Severus' silence grew heavy with that same awareness. "I did--but I hadn't slept all night, and I dozed off..."

"Fine, Potter. Would you please wait outside for a moment while I finish with Professor Snape?"

"But I really need to tell you--"

"Oh and you shall...I want to hear every detail, I assure you." She nodded to the door. Harry restrained himself, turned around on the spot, and stalked stiffly out of the office. He did not look up at Severus as he exited, closing the door behind him.

Minerva waited until the lock clicked shut before readdressing her fellow Order member again.

"Durmstrang, Severus." The dark wizard growled in protest but she cut across him firmly. "He will be allowed to sit his O.W.L. exams here, under the strictest probation. Tonks will be keeping an eye on him until the end of term; then his relationship with this school and its students is over. I shall write the Headmaster there tonight—his transfer should be effective at the beginning of the next school term."

"You realize," his voice was very quiet and shaking with restrained anger, "that if he is sent to such a place, he will fall in with some of the darkest wizarding families of Europe. He will be influenced there..." he trailed off.

Harry stood stock still outside the door, slowing his breathing and making himself as quiet as possible as he strained to hear.

Minerva nodded at Severus unsympathetically. "I've made my decision."

"You are dividing the Order..."

"As are you, Severus." Minerva smiled for the first time since they'd been talking. "Which boy, do you think, will turn out to be the surest bet?"

The truth, Severus...she thought. Tell me the truth. His lips parted thinly, but he swallowed back his words and turned to snatch open the door. Harry stood just outside looking pale and dispassionate, having put on his poker face—though to Severus his green eyes shined with what looked like arrogance and...triumph. He glared at the side of Harry's head as the boy made his way past him into the office. Glancing at Minerva one last time, he left them in a cloud of black robes.

When he had gone she almost let out her breath, visibly deflating her strict façade; but she looked down at Harry and decided against it.

"Now, Potter..." she did sit down, allowing herself that small break, and gestured for him to do the same as she gestured with her wand so that the door closed behind Severus. "You were saying about a dream you shouldn't have had?"

Sunlight caressed the large windows of the Great Hall, and the Enchanted Ceiling reflected a bright, nearly cloudless day. Spirits were generally high—Umbridge was gone, Easter Holidays were approaching, and today the Quidditch Cup would be awarded. The students were content to let the stress of their exams fade away for today and focus on other, happier things. Well, most were content. Hermione Granger, however, still had a bit of a problem.

"It isn't just that all of this is going to interfere with our studying for exams and our schoolwork," Hermione frowned deeply as she picked through a platter of croissants, trying to find the almond kind, "but hasn't he considered that most parents wouldn't want their children participating in a full-blown Hogwarts army--?"

"Hermione...!" Ron hissed, looking around them warily before turning back to finish pouring his orange juice and giving her a nasty look. "Keep it down, will you?"

Hermione returned his look with verve, dropping the almond croissant onto her plate crossly.

The Quidditch players were all hurriedly trying to fill themselves on breakfast before they ran off to the pitch. Students were rapidly filling the Great Hall—voices were raised in a cheerful tide as they flowed in. The Slytherins and Gryffindors wore their House colors brightly and proudly. Other Houses wore badges or carried flags supporting whichever team they thought had the best chance. Ron was glad to see Gryffindor held the majority of support from both Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs.

"Ron you cannot tell me that you aren't worried what your mother would do if she found out you're a part of some suicide club with a bunch of other students determined to put themselves in harm's way should Hogwarts ever be attacked..." Hermione pressed as Ron shoved a whole piece of eggy bread in his mouth and took a swig of juice.

"Hadn't crossed my mind," he muttered around egg and bread and orange juice. Hermione knew he was lying, as she could see quite clearly that bringing it up had turned his cheeks a shade of red that wasn't there before. He managed to swallow thickly and stood up from the table. "Look, Hermione...I understand you're concerned. You know what? I am too, but today is match day and I'd rather not think about death and giants and You-Know-Who right now, all right? Angelina says I need to focus on saving goals like my life depended on it, and that's what I'm gonna do. Now if you'll excuse me..."

He belched loudly and stood a little taller, actually pushing his chest out and holding his chin up. Before she could protest any further, Ron was off through the crowd, receiving claps on the back from various students in a gesture of good luck. At least he's finally feeling confident about Quidditch, she thought before turning to Ginny, who had been eyeing her brother in contemplative silence.

"He seems much better this time, doesn't he? I'm sure it'll be fine," she reassured the younger girl. "You'd better hurry anyway; Angelina's probably looking for you."

"Oh it's not that..." Ginny sat up straight and reached out for an apple. She bit into it, chewing thoughtfully. "I was just thinking...Harry isn't asking us to put ourselves in harm's way just for him; he's only asking us to prepare ourselves. That's all."

Hermione opened her mouth, but Ginny spoke before she could.

"I mean...would you want to be cowering in the common room with Death Eaters or whoever else tearing through the school? When you were in the girls' toilets that time the mountain troll got let in, didn't it feel pretty rotten to be taken by surprise like that? You could've died, but Ron and Harry protected you."

"I...well...yes I suppose you're right." Hermione took another bite of croissant and sighed. She couldn't figure how to express what bothered her without sounding like an overbearing nag. Harry's determination and seriousness was completely genuine, she saw last night, and despite her hurt that he didn't feel confident she could help him with Occlumency, she had to admit that his passion for the DA's next step was rather contagious. But she still knew that things would not be as simple as one, two, three, and presto; we've got an army ready to do battle.

She sighed, opening her mouth to mention this aloud. Before she got a word out, however, the sound of the post owls arriving cut her off.

A skinny, mean-looking owl landed in front of her with a shrill squawk and stuck its leg out curtly. She removed the Daily Prophet from the beast and allowed it to take a sickle from her palm before watching it fly off again.

She unrolled the newspaper and made a face at the cover page—it was a large picture of a frazzled and indignant-looking Delores Umbridge with her hands in shackles. Her normally composed, deceptively 'sweet' demeanor had vanished and now she simply looked a mess with her short hair all over her head and her prim

robes replaced by shabby Azkaban prison attire. She was flanked by two stone-faced Aurors who were holding her by the elbows while at the same time attempting to keep the press at bay. Delores simply glared at Hermione with utmost loathing, and the girl actually thought she favored her usual patronizing smile to such an awful scowl.

The Minister of Magic stepped into frame, looking world-weary and ill-tempered. He took off his bowler hat and began pointing to various members of the press, obviously answering questions they had been attempting to bombard Umbridge with.

MINISTRY FAVORITE CAUGHT RED-HANDED!

Delores Umbridge awaits sentencing for a slew of scandalous crimes! Details, page 4.

“About time...” Hermione muttered, turning to page four. Ginny took another bite of her apple and leaned over to read along.

“Despite efforts to keep the press in the dark until after the hearing Sunday morning, the Daily Prophet has learned that Delores Jane Umbridge (former undersecretary to the Minister, High Inquisitor, and recently appointed Headmistress of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry) has been arrested and charged for a number of crimes including the attempted use of Veritaserum and the Unforgivable Cruciatus on an underage wizard.

Though both Delores’ representation and the Minister remain quite mum, sources tell us that said potential recipient of the terrible Torture Curse is none other than Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived.

“I will not be addressing any rumors about Potter’s involvement, and that is all I shall say on the matter!” Minister Fudge stated this morning when asked to confirm these reports. “Delores Umbridge has been arrested because of an anonymous tip we received about her involvement in a Dementor attack on a muggle boy last summer, among other things.”

The Minister seemed hesitant to add that Umbridge confessed to having an accomplice in the aforementioned attack—and with good

reason. Quite grudgingly, he admitted that Lucius Malfoy, a well-connected and widely respected member of the board of directors in the Ministry's-- ”

“Poor Fudge; what a scandal,” Ginny said with mock sympathy, rolling her eyes. “Of course he wouldn't admit that Harry was the one Umbridge was trying to curse; he wouldn't dream of telling anyone the boy he's been making out as a liar for months actually caught on to that crazy old bat and tricked her into confessing everything.” She scoffed and straightened up, sticking the apple in her mouth and grabbing her broom.

“Anonymous tip, indeed...” Hermione snorted in agreement, her eyes still scanning the article, which mentioned that Lucius Malfoy had been ‘unavailable for questioning’. That really means he's fled arrest, she thought. Ginny waved and muttered ‘see you later’ around her apple and Hermione wished her luck. She took the time to finish reading the article before folding the paper again neatly and drinking the last of her juice.

A few minutes later, she was making her way with the crowd down to the pitch, the morning sun warming her face, when Neville Longbottom caught up to her. “Hey Hermione, have you seen Harry?” he asked at once.

She frowned and shook her curly head. “No...I thought he might be with you and Seamus saving seats already. He didn't show up at breakfast. Have you seen this morning's paper?”

Neville glanced at the cover with Umbridge and frowned, shaking his head no. “Nah...I've been looking all over for Harry. When I was eating my hash browns I heard Lee Jordan saying he had some sort of fit in the showers.”

It was Hermione's turn to furrow her brow into a frown. Neville's eyes scanned the crowd as they moved down the tree-shaded path. “A fit? What sort of ‘fit’, Neville?” Her heart began to beat faster and she found herself searching the crowd along with Neville, having to wave distractedly at Padma Patil and her friend Lavender Brown, who twirled their noisemakers at her excitedly. She just knew it was

another disturbing dream or vision or whatever from Voldemort. She always felt herself panicking every time Harry got a pain in his scar or looked as if he hadn't slept—which she knew he hadn't from the look of him this morning when she saw him in the common room. Damn it, why wouldn't he listen to her?

"Well Lee said he heard somethin' breaking in Harry's stall, and a few seconds later he heard Harry shouting. When he looked out, Harry was running through the shower room with his hand bleedin' and there was a big hole in the wall."

Hermione tore her gaze from the bobbing heads of hurrying students and gasped softly. "Oh my goodness...he probably broke his hand! And no one's seen him at all since then?"

Neville shook his head. "No. I checked the hospital wing and even went back up to our room, but he'd left already." He looked as worried as she felt. She didn't pause to wonder at this; she could address the fact that Harry had chosen to spend most of his time with Neville and not his other friends for the last couple of days later when she found out what was going on.

Her eyes fell on the threshold of the Forbidden Forest; the sun made the shadows between the trees grow deeper as they walked along the path towards the pitch. Despite the warm sunshine, she shivered when she pictured a horde of centaurs lurking beyond those shadows with deadly, gleaming black eyes and expressions of the utmost loathing for her and all her human kind....and somewhere behind them in the thick of the forest a giant with hands that could crumble her like a cracker sat waiting...

"Hermione, all right?" She turned to see Hagrid emerging from the forest a little ways ahead of her and Neville. Despite his nearly unrecognizable face, he was smiling warmly. Hermione felt a sickly quiver in her stomach as she observed Hagrid's wounds but forced a smile and a little wave.

"Morning, Hagrid..."

Hagrid waited for the two of them to reach him and fell into step. "An' it's a beautiful mornin' as well, innit?" he asked cheerfully. Both of them shrugged. Truly the day did look as though it were getting off to a lovely start. Very warm, even though spring hadn't graced them quite yet, with crisp, fresh air from the mountains blowing softly every now and again.

Yes...a lovely morning...but one couldn't always count on appearances, could one?

The second Draco Malfoy opened his eyes, everything his father said the night before came back to him as though he were remembering a particularly repellent dream. His stomach lurched unpleasantly and he felt a strong ache seize him about his temples.

It didn't help that he'd been shaken awake by his heavy handed lump of a roommate, Goyle, whose already unattractive face was crumpled up with urgency. "Draco, wake up! Montague's looking for you—you'd better hurry or you'll be late!" He gave Draco another shake, and when he received no response, he reached in again. Draco's hand shot out, catching his wrist. Goyle winced, surprised that the grip was so tight; it actually hurt.

"Stop shaking me, you useless bag of guts," uttered the pale boy, fixing him with an icy glare. "I heard you the first five times..."

"Sorry," Goyle frowned, withdrawing his hand and rubbing the wrist where Draco had grabbed him, "but it's almost eight. Montague says he wants you down on the pitch in twenty minutes."

Draco rolled his eyes and sat up slowly. "The bloody match doesn't start until ten, what's he want me there so early for?" Goyle shrugged and turned to shuffle back over to his four-poster. Draco still felt sick, as though he would vomit at any moment. His stomach was empty, however, which made the feeling worse than it might have been. He sat there for a few minutes longer, trying not to remember what he had to do...what he had to somehow pull off in the next month and a half. He tried not to picture himself meeting a squishy demise at the hands (or feet, or mouth) of a giant beast.

He tried not to think about Angelina.

But, as he tried, he could not resist closing his eyes and imagining her curvy body underneath his or the hot push of breath through those full lips or the sound such a push would make...

He opened his eyes again abruptly and got up from his bed, grabbing his towel from the top of his trunk and heading for the Slytherin boys' showers.

The magical sunlight in the shower room immediately annoyed him. Why couldn't it for once just be a dungeon? Why did it have to be bewitched to reflect the mornings and nights they could not see down here? He felt the need to be closed off from such revealing light; shut up in a dark room cold and gloomy so that he could fume in private. He kept wondering, as he stalked into an empty stall and turned on the water, how he would manage it. How would he manage to disable whatever complex wards surrounded a giant that would kill him as soon look at him? He could study—he could identify and research them. He could learn to do it on his own, rather than having to find some way for his father's friends to get onto the grounds. The latter seemed a great deal more inconvenient than the former.

Then what?

He sighed heavily...the water ran over his eyelashes. "You're a charming fellow, when you want to be, Draco..." He nodded; she was right. Angelina took the soap from his hand and began to rub it between her delicate fingers, causing fat soapy bubbles to spill between them. He allowed her to touch him, running her fingers over his shoulders and chest; the soap rolled down his torso, mixing silkily with the water. "It'll be hard...but you can do it. Just talk to the giant, like your father said. Convince it that it wouldn't want to hurt you...because you're important..."

The deep, calm tone to her voice was unsettlingly erotic to him. He almost closed his eyes, but he didn't want to miss out on the sight of her lovely, dark skin mingling with his own milky white complexion as the soap and water ran slick and warm down his body. She stood next to him in bare feet, wearing her school uniform. He had always liked the look of her long legs in those short skirts...

Her nipples were peaking through the wet, sheer cotton fabric of her blouse as it was saturated with soapy water.

"I'm important." He didn't want it to sound so much like a question, but he needed to hear her confirm it for him.

"Oh yes..." she cooed, making soapy circles across his chest with those tantalizing fingertips of hers. "He asked you do to this, and no one else. He trusts you; he has high expectations of you, Draco...and you won't disappoint."

"No, I won't. I'll show my father who's a child and who isn't. I'll show him who's weak..." Her fingers brushed against the wet hair crowning his phallus.

He was beginning to feel better. He turned to face her, his expression predatory. He was important. The Dark Lord had chosen him...given him a chance to prove himself. If he failed...but he would not. Not if she were there...in the end. In the end, this daydream would not be a daydream; it would be the real thing. He could really have her if he worked hard, and proved himself. If his father had passed on nothing else, it was certainly ambition. The Malfoy's were notoriously ambitious people, who got what they set their sights on and whose name was synonymous with achievement. Why shouldn't he have her? Why shouldn't he have whomever he wished? What was so wrong with getting his way for once?

"It's not real, Draco..." she said, much to his annoyance.

"Yes it is. It might not have started out that way...but now I know for certain that I want you, and I'll have you."

"Will you have me?" Her tone was rebellious; almost teasing. Her expression was wicked. "What about Harry Potter? Last I checked, I was his girlfriend, not yours..."

Draco reached up and closed his hand around her throat. He squeezed, and her eyes went wide and watery as her breath was cut off. It was so strange how beautiful her face was when it was

constricted in pain or panic. The cranberry flush of her cheeks...the tenderness of her lips...he felt himself becoming erect and his breath grew encumbered with desire. He backed her up so that her soft locks of ebony hair pressed against the slippery tiles and her breasts heaved as she tried to find air. He squeezed harder. "Touch me, and I'll let go..."

He felt her hand on him. He closed his eyes. She softly caressed his flesh...he became so hard that he opened his mouth and pushed out a sigh of pleasure. If only she were his...

"If there are any team members in here, you've got ten minutes or I'll hex you six ways from Sunday! Hurry up, you gits!"

Draco was evilly startled out of his fantasy by Montague's bellowing. He squeezed the bar of soap in his hand to mush as he let go of himself. His arousal began to retreat as quickly as it had arrived. He stared at the tile wall where she should've been standing and sighed. He still felt...sick. Was it—was this all—a side effect of the potion his father had given him? He didn't like the feeling at all...he didn't like anything about this morning; none of it mattered much to him anymore; not when the night before had been so pivotal.

In his room again, retrieving his Quidditch boots and broom, Draco fished out the potion he was supposed to be taking to rid himself of the withdrawal Snape said would be 'unpleasant' and 'unpredictable'. Right now, aside from the queasiness, the only things he felt were the weight of responsibility and an ever-growing shadow of doom. This shadow did not hang over him, however...it hung over Potter, and anyone else who was unfortunate enough to get in Draco's way. Though he resented his father and what had been done to him, he could not help feeling grateful at the same time.

He hadn't really been able to see before, so mired down was he with the trivial 'concerns' of his fellow school chums, that outside these walls forces were gathering to shift power in the wizarding world. Old sentimental farts like Albus Dumbledore and arse-kissing nobodies like Delores Umbridge would soon see the return of the noble, powerful, and only true way of living in magic. Pure blood wizards—wizards born with the gifts of magic—were the way of the future.

Draco's father was only, though perhaps harshly, trying to secure Draco's place in the big come up. Despite the methods...yes, Draco was grateful.

He left the potion untouched and made his way down into the common room, where a group of Slytherins had assembled before trooping off to breakfast together. Pansy rushed up to him smirking. Her dark hair, short and sleek, was adorned with a silver serpent barrette. The emerald eye of the serpent glinted in the artificial sunlight streaming in through the 'windows' as she kissed him lightly on the cheek. Draco tried not to visibly flinch when she took hold of his arm possessively and offered to carry his boots. "The girls and I wrote a cheer for you, Draco," she said in her prissy whine as she attached herself to him. "It's even better than the one you made up about that awful Weasley boy. It goes--"

"I don't want to hear it," he cut her off, dislodging himself from her and reaching for his boots. "I'm running late."

"But..." her pale gray eyes flashed and her porcelain cheeks pinked up with embarrassment as she looked around to make sure none of her friends were watching. Blaise Zabini made no show of pretending he wasn't taking in every word, but Draco didn't really care who saw. He was simply not in the mood for her today. "But Draco, we always go down together..."

He clenched his jaw when she refused to hand him his boots. "Not today. Montague wants me down at the pitch now. Give those back, Pansy."

Instead, she stepped closer to him and lowered her voice, holding his boots behind her back. "What's the matter with you? You've been acting...well you've been acting really strange lately. Missing classes and hardly eating and always going off on your own!" she hissed, that whine of hers grating his nerves. "It's embarrassing; everyone's asking me what's wrong and I can't explain it because I've hardly seen you for two seconds together, Draco! If you want to chuck me or something, just say so..." He almost laughed at the dread in her eyes. You'd probably consider it social murder if I dumped you on your boney arse, he thought to himself cruelly.

Draco sighed, trying not to lose his patience with her. For a split second, he considered telling her the truth: that he had some things on his mind, namely the dangerous mission his father the Death Eater had given him whilst she gossiped with her friends in the Great Hall the night before. He knew, however, that she wouldn't understand how serious he was. She wasn't a serious girl, after all. Pansy was...Pansy. Opportunistic and shallow.

He forced a charming smile, his stomach going ice cold as he did so. "I'm not going to break up with you, Pansy. What kind of sense would that make?" His implied concern with appearances either went over her head or she felt the same way. Could it be both at the same time? "I'm just not in the mood to get hexed this morning, all right? Montague's waiting...can I please have my boots back?" Pansy looked forbidding still, but when he gave her a soft kiss on the mouth she giggled and nodded, handing him his boots obediently.

Girls were so easy to manipulate...well...some girls...

Draco did not wait for her to speak again, instead turning and walking quickly towards the common room entrance. He was unaware that Blaise was following him until he had passed the suit of armor and was half way down the hall. "Hey, Malfoy, wait up."

He turned and found the dark skinned, handsome boy striding towards him with a smirk in his light brown eyes.

"What is it, Zabini?" Blaise hardly caught up before Draco was walking again. "Don't tell me you've made up a cheer as well?"

Zabini laughed in his usually unconcerned way, shrugging his lean shoulders as he kept up with Draco easily. They bypassed the Great Hall and headed straight through the open oak doors leading out onto the grounds. A few clumps of students were already making their way down to the pitch, but Draco paid little attention to the cheers or jeers he received from either Gryffindor or Slytherin supporters as they walked on down the path along the lake. "Actually, mate," Blaise answered as they walked through a patch of shade given by the tree

Draco remembered so fondly from months past, “I just wanted to ask you something...”

Draco couldn’t help tightening his jaw. He couldn’t think what the hell Blaise wanted to ask him that would cause such a confident smirk to grace his already pompously composed features. “Ask it then...” he said carefully, ambling down the hill at his own pace. He was taller than Blaise, so the other boy had to walk a little faster to keep up, but it didn’t seem to bother him.

“You’ve got another bird, don’t you?”

“What?”

“Well...it’s just occurred to me, watching you smooth talk Parkinson in the common room. You have been sneaking off on your own for months, now. We hardly see you lately, and when we do see you, you’re always so preoccupied and moody.”

“Did it ever occur to you that I don’t need to hang around with you all day and every day?” Draco replied, keeping his eyes straight ahead. They were almost to the gates. “I’ve got other things to do besides listen to you and Pansy drabble on about the same old tripe.”

“Is that right?” Blaise only smiled lazily at the gibe, apparently unaffected. This was a quality of his that initially spurred their friendship, but that recently irritated Draco no end. “...well, would some of those ‘other things’ happen to be with Angelina Johnson, that Gryffindor girl you’re always staring at?”

Draco stopped walking abruptly and turned to face the other boy. For a split second he felt panic rise up in him, coupled with the overwhelming urge to pull his wand. These feelings were fleeting, however. He opted to return Blaise’s slick smile. “You’re joking, right?”

Blaise shrugged, turning his brown eyes up to the sky to squint at the sun as he drew out suspense. He seemed to realize that Draco was dying to know how and when he came to such a conclusion about Angelina. “You want to deny it? Suit yourself...I don’t blame you

really. I mean—imagine what people would say if word spread that you were having it off with that blood-traitor. I mean, she's Potter's girlfriend...I didn't think sloppy seconds were your style, Malfoy."

"I'm not having it off with her. I haven't touched her..." he lied, that sick feeling sinking into him again. "I wouldn't touch her if she were the last pure blood in the United Kingdom."

Blaise looked skeptical, and his smile remained. People passed them noisy and oblivious; the two boys stood staring at each other, neither willing to take anything back. The sun shined in Draco's eyes and he turned away to cross the gates onto the pitch. "I saw you, Draco."

Draco stopped again, not turning this time. Blaise walked up to him and came around to his front, leaning in close so that Draco's hand ached for his wand and his heart pounded in his chest. "Saw me what?" His mind reeled—he thought of the path and the tree and her thrashing about underneath him in the dirt. He thought of the Memory Charm and the duel and the kiss he stole on that rainy, chilly Valentine's Day in the tunnel.

"Every time Johnson is in the same room with you, you're sneaking looks at her. Every time we pass her and Potter in the halls, you look just as nettled as my Dad when the house elf cocks something up. I saw you doodling her name in History of Magic; I saw you scribbling in that playbook you stole—don't think I didn't recognize it the second word got out about that row McGonagall and Umbridge had--"

"Shut your mouth, Zabini or I'll curse you..." He did reach for his wand then, his anger coursing through him so that it actually served to clear his head. "So what if I did steal her playbook? So what if I look at her sometimes...that's not why I've been on my own lately."

"Oh yeah? Due tell, Malfoy. I'm all ears."

"You're too young to understand."

"I'm the same age as you, what's to understand? That you're in love with a blood traitor Gryffindor? That you're jealous of Potter?"

"No..." Draco's eyes burned into Blaise's and he leaned in closer, wary of the sideways glances they were receiving from passing students. And then it hit him—like a ton of bricks. He smiled, causing Blaise to blink in surprise for the first time in the whole conversation. He knew Blaise well enough to understand that the boy liked having dirt on people. He liked the power of knowing everyone else's secrets and finding ways to belittle those people for them. He might have been angered by Draco's lack of interest in him—in all of his friends—over the months as his strange obsession with Angelina and his determination to get back at Potter took him over. He liked having the dirt on Draco because it made him feel powerful—he might have even fancied himself in the position to use this information to replace Draco as the leader of their little clique.

But none of these trivial things were what had Draco so pleased all of a sudden. No, he realized then that he could use Blaise—by playing at his need to feel important and above everyone else and using a particular knowledge he possessed at the same time. And when he had gotten what he wanted...well he knew how to perform a Memory Charm, didn't he? And he would bloody well make sure it worked this time...

"There's something important I have to do. Something big; something dangerous..."

"What's so 'dangerous' then?"

"You take Ancient Runes, don't you?" Draco asked, ignoring the question.

Blaise scoffed. "Yeah...so what?"

"You can help me. If you do, I'll make sure they know you did and you'll be rewarded."

Blaise looked like he was onto Draco...but the calculating gaze only lasted for a moment. Probably the words 'important' and 'rewarded' intrigued him, as Draco knew they would. Finally, he asked: "Who is 'they'...?"

Harry licked his lips, a strong curiosity about what he'd walked into poking at him as he sat down in his usual chair. Though he very much wanted to ask, he decided to quell his intense curiosity for the moment and begin with the simple truth. "Um...listen...I did lie to you about my Occlumency."

"Yes I know." The Headmistress leaned forward slightly and brought her hands together over the surface of the large desk, raising an eyebrow at the boy. "Let me guess: to remove yourself from Professor Snape's supervision because you distrust him, am I right?"

He nodded. Somewhere far away beyond the office, a bell tolled. Following it was the unmistakable rumble of hundreds of students spilling out into the halls and eventually onto the grounds. The sun was shining brightly now through the windows, touching them both on their faces and in their eyes, warming their skin and the clothes they wore. Noisemakers and chants and the din of excited chatter reached them from the land below through an open window behind Harry.

McGonagall sighed. "I'll forgive you your dishonesty for now, Potter. You had something you wanted to tell me?"

The troubled young wizard sat and told her about his vision, including the part where he took pleasure in torturing and killing himself as Voldemort. She listened, her eyes narrowed in contemplation as he recounted everything he could remember. He did not divulge that he'd broken his hand, though, not wishing to be cross examined about it.

"I think it must've been an accident, like maybe he was the one dreaming or something..." Harry continued, leaning forward in his chair. "I mean...why would he let me see that on purpose? No I think he means to set a trap for me, or he already has, to get me to come there. He wants me to get it, most likely because he wants whatever happened to that Bode guy to happen to me...or worse."

"Do you know what he's after?" Minerva asked.

"I really only know a couple of things for certain: there's a room in the Department of Mysteries that's filled with shelves, and sitting all along

the shelves are these...little glass globes full of light." He paused, his mind recalling the image of the orbs of light glittering all around him, before continuing. "And the other thing is—well, there was something I--Voldemort--said that sounded odd to me."

"What did he say?"

"He said...that he needed to hear something; that he needed to hear every word."

McGonagall sat there for a moment, taking this information in. Her lips pursed thoughtfully and she stood up from the desk, walking towards her earlier spot near the window adjacent to Harry. The sunlight glared against the gold feather in her cap. He saw her shoulders rise and fall with a heavy sigh. "There have always been rumors about what goes on in the Department of Mysteries. Though, truthfully, no one but those who work there can say exactly what lies beyond the legendary unmarked doors." She frowned grimly. "It is said that not even the Minister himself could answer questions about what the Unspeakables do there."

Harry waited.

"There have been many accounts, however—some from former Unspeakables, some from dozens of mad or opportunistic witches and wizards over the years—of the things that go on there. Breeding chambers for ancient magical creatures believed to be extinct. Creatures so dangerous, they say, that to let the general wizarding public know they still exist would induce mass panic." She offered a mystified scoff and continued staring off into the distance, watching as hundreds of students filled the observation towers on the pitch. "Rooms filled with the darkest magical instruments; the most dangerous kinds of dark enchantments placed on other rooms for study; execution rooms said to have been used at one time by the very first Wizengamot."

She sighed and turned to face him again.

"...and then I've heard of another room...a Hall of Prophecy, it's called...said to house thousands of records of prophecies made over

centuries by Seers from all over the world. It has existed only as a legend, mind you, and has never actually been confirmed by any official at the Ministry as actually being real. But I've seen artists' renderings...some are different than others; everyone has their own idea of what such a place would look like...but there is one that comes to mind when you describe what you saw in your dreams, Potter."

Harry licked his lips, his temples growing warm with anticipation. "A room with shelves? Filled with...?"

Very slightly, she nodded yes. "I saw it when I was a fifth year in a book I'd taken from the Restricted Section out of boredom or curiosity or both one night...a room with row upon row of shelves each so tall they seemed to reach the unseen ceiling. The room was dark, but it was illuminated by hundreds of small, round globes filled with warm light..."

"Then what he needs to hear is some sort of prophecy?" Harry sat forward in his chair, ignoring the eyes of the portraits resting on him, thinking hard. "What could it be about...?"

McGonagall narrowed her eyes at him; in quite the way she would if he were struggling with a Transfiguration technique. "Can you not guess, Potter?" He blinked. Some how or other, even with the warm sunlight invading the room, he felt a chill wash over him, making the hairs on his arms and neck and head seem to stand on end. "You said so yourself: Lord Voldemort has been obsessed with this room for months and months; dreaming about it, searching for it, killing for it...and at the same time wanting you to go there. Laying a trap for you, as it were."

"Yes, because he can't take a prophecy out himself." Harry agreed, still feeling as though he were on the verge of something sinister. "The place is cursed; anyone who tries to remove one loses his mind or worse. It happened to that Bode fellow."

"Broderick Bode, yes..." she nodded, still staring at him. "We knew about him. We suspected Voldemort had something to do with that, and that was why we asked Author to keep watch."

Harry shook his head, sighing. "Yeah, and he got attacked for it..." He squinted at the sunlight streaming in across McGonagall's face, his eyes shifting from her to the skyline behind her. A prophecy...about what? Knowing how badly Voldemort wanted it, it probably had something to do with the outcome of the war. Harry perked up, bringing his attention back to the room again. "Maybe he thinks it'll tell him how to defeat Dumbledore."

"Maybe..." McGonagall frowned.

"You don't think so?"

"Potter...perhaps you could do something for me?"

"Sure..." She bridged the gap between them, leaning over the desk to retrieve a quill and clean parchment. He watched her jot something down, and when she handed it to him he stared at it questioningly. It was a title. Facing the Unspeakable: The Gruesome and Disturbing History of the Department of Mysteries. "What's this?"

"That is the book where I saw the illustration you described. It's in the Restricted Section. Frankly I'm surprised Miss Granger hasn't found it already."

"Oh, well, we don't--" Harry started, but she stopped him with a raised hand and a pointed look.

"Potter, every student at one time or another visits the Restricted Section. Knowing you and your friends, I'll venture to guess that you lot have been there more than the average, but at any rate the book is there and you might find it...illuminating." She took a pocket watch from a fold in her robes and shook her head. "The match will be starting any minute. I expect you to report to me tomorrow on your findings, Potter."

Without waiting for him to respond, she made her way towards the large door of the office.

"Perhaps together we can make sense of this mystery, finally."

Harry sat staring at the parchment for a moment before getting up to follow her, feeling odd. They left the Head's office and walked in silence down the spiral stair. When they reached the gargoyle and it closed off the entrance behind them, Harry stopped walking and felt the question fall from his mouth of its own accord. "Professor..." he began, and she turned around to regard him expectantly, "you were talking with Snape about Draco Malfoy before I came in, weren't you? You're sending him to Durmstrang next year."

Minerva blinked, almost taken aback by his unabashed way of posing the question. She considered him for a second before nodding. "Yes, I am sending Malfoy to Durmstrang next term, if they'll have him. I know you may think my allowing him to stay even until the end of this term might be too merciful, but there is a process to transferring a student that isn't timely. Though with his family influence I'm sure he'll be accepted."

"But what did Snape mean about dark wizarding families? Shouldn't Malfoy be kept away from places like that?"

Minerva raised an eyebrow at him. She was tempted to be cross with him for eavesdropping, and even more so for questioning her decision, but decided to let her patience win out. "You mean to tell me that you do not wish for him to be sent away? After what he did to Angelina, you would rather I keep him here at Hogwarts?"

Harry paused, not really sure why he was making this point; as far as he was concerned, having Malfoy as far away as possible was the best thing that could happen, if only for the other boy's safety. Any other twitch of movement towards Angelina and Harry was likely to throw caution to the wind and really hurt the little shit. Still—something about having him surrounded by what Harry had heard was the crème de la crème of dark wizarding families did not sit well. Though what was the point of dwelling on this? Draco Malfoy was as saturated in the pure blood aristocracy and dark nobility running through his family line as anyone he would find at Durmstrang. Best to dump him in among his own and be done with him.

Perhaps Headmistress McGonagall felt this way as well. "No—I think he should be dragged down to the dungeons with Filch for a few days before he goes, but I guess torture isn't your thing..."

"You are correct in that assumption, Potter." She smirked again and turned to resume her way, but he could not help himself, and he called her back a second time. Frowning, she paused again. "Yes?"

It was Harry's turn to close the gap between them. "Last night Alastor Moody showed up. He told me...he told me you asked him to train me."

"Yes, I did."

For some reason this particular part of the castle was empty and silent. Had they missed so much of the morning? Everyone was down at the pitch, it seemed, except the two of them.

"Why?"

The silence made her next words heavy with the kind of meaning that could give a person chills. "Because I believe you have the potential to become a very powerful wizard, Potter," she answered truthfully. "I told you before—you possess something unique; something I had not yet seen in my lifetime. It's only showing itself in its basest form right now, but when you have total control...it could be something...magnificent."

"If that's true, why does Professor Dumbledore want me to suppress it with Occlumency?"

"For your protection. He only wanted you to be safe, and at the time he thought it the best course of action given the circumstances. Obviously...that course of action has proven unsuccessful." She crossed her arms and fixed him with a stern look. "That is the only reason I didn't bother when you admitted your dishonesty about mastering Occlumency, Potter."

He felt relief wash over him—he would no longer have to worry about learning Occlumency from Snape. Despite what others might say,

Harry knew it had a lot to do with him finding that memory. That discovery turned things around, and he didn't regret snooping.

"Dumbledore has seen fit to allow me to find another way, so you will be trained." After a pause she looked into his eyes again and continued earnestly: "Harry, its no mystery by now Voldemort wants you dead. He doesn't realize what you carry inside you, and that's damned lucky because if he gets wind of it there's no telling what he would do. That's why I'm going to see to it that you're prepared."

"Thank you, Professor. It's what I've wanted..."

"I know it is. I don't blame you...this is a very hard situation for a boy as young as you to be faced with, and I'm sorry." She paused again, this time longer than any of the others. When she spoke next, Harry recognized immediately the kind of tone adults always used when they were about to deny him something for what were always (in his opinion) inequitable reasons. "However...you understand that we must be very, very careful from now on? Your training doesn't begin until summer, so until then I must ask you to keep a low profile. The Ministry is still looking for Albus, and I might add, still trying to discredit you and your claims that Voldemort has resurfaced."

"But Fudge appointed you Headmistress...doesn't he know you support me and Dumbledore?"

She didn't need to shake her head or verbally confirm what he could see in her eyes. "I was simply next in line. I decided to do what's best for the school, and that certainly wasn't allowing him to appoint someone else like Delores."

"So you didn't support either of us, then." Harry felt himself, after being relieved only a few seconds ago, becoming angry. He tried to bat it away; tried not to allow the heat in his temples to swell or his pulse to race or his hands to become fists. But this shift in mood seemed to be his only comfort lately, aside from his love for Angelina. If he could rely on nothing else; Harry knew he could count on his anger. It seemed to be watching...waiting to emerge when he needed it too, and even when he didn't realize he did. Sort of like Dumbledore; it was his guardian.

"That's not true, Potter. I have always made it perfectly clear where I stand, which is more than I can say for some." He knew she meant Snape.

The sound of horns from the pitch spilled through the windows lining the hall just then, signaling the start of the match. Faint echoes of thunderous cheering and stomping wafted in immediately afterwards. They knew the match was getting underway now, but both of them stood stone still watching each other in silence. McGonagall sighed.

"Alastor told me what you were doing in the Room of Requirement with Neville Longbottom. I did support the DA's existence when Delores refused to teach basic skills that you need to have in order to pass your exams, but now..." she reached up and rubbed her temples, showing the first sign of weariness that Harry had seen since they began. "The reason people cannot believe that Voldemort has returned is because they are afraid. Can you imagine what would happen if any student's parents found out that I allowed some sort of...secret battle training to take place in this school?"

It seemed to Harry that she was trying to convince herself as much as she was him.

"They would probably demand my resignation, or worse...if any student was harmed...they might call for the school's closure. I'm sorry, but I cannot risk that, not even for you, P--"

"So you will train me; help me learn to protect myself from him..." Harry shook his head slowly, "but you won't let me help the others learn to protect themselves as well. You think that's fair? I'm not going to let Voldemort attack us without being prepared for it!"

She put her hands on her hips. "The DA is a club, not an army! Its members are students, most of whom don't even possess the skill to take on Professor Grubbly-Plank, let alone--"

"...a giant?" Harry uttered defiantly. "You don't know—you haven't seen us. We're not incompetent, and we're not stupid either."

"At this point, Potter, that is a matter of opinion, and would you mind telling me how in bloody hell you found out about...?" Minerva stopped herself. She had become, all at once, just as furious as he was. It was obvious to her that the gullible game keeper had revealed the secret. She would deal with him later. Right now she needed to set some ground rules with her young charge; she was finding the task of taking over his care quite challenging already and the day had just begun! "Now listen to me--you are not to enter the Forest again without expressed permission from a teacher, and even then--"

"But, if you would just--!" the boy protested, but she cut across him firmly.

"Even then you will not approach the giant, ever before it's removed from these grounds, is that clear?" He kept his mouth shut, but she didn't need him to answer. "You are not to speak about what's in the Forest to anyone. And no more Dumbledore's Army! These walls are protected by extremely powerful magic, Potter; the chances of the kind of attack you're talking about are very slim. Even if something were to penetrate our defenses, do you imagine that any of the other teachers or myself would sit on our hands and do nothing? Do you honestly think the Order has not taken steps to protect this place? We must focus on keeping you alive, and that is quite enough already without you putting dozens more in harm's way. Now, we can discuss what you find in the book tomorrow morning."

She smoothed the front of her robes and headed away, the heels of her boots landing sharply on the marble floor.

Harry stood there staring after her, the silence engulfing him, feeding his anger, making him want to smash something. He felt split in half—almost ready to refuse her bloody training in the summer because she was refusing him the DA. Damn it, she was acting no better than sodding Umbridge! Why wouldn't she listen to him? His frustration bubbled over, making his temples and neck feel hot.

There was a very faint sound reaching his ears through the silence. It wasn't the cheering from the pitch, or Lee Jordan's barely audible commentary. It was the sound of crumbling...or of tiny rocks sliding down...Harry looked to his left and saw, in the stone wall underneath

one of the large windows, a narrow crack running all the way down to the floor. He walked over to it slowly, kneeling down and reaching out to touch it.

The young man, alone in the hall, stared at this seemingly unremarkable crack in the wall and felt his anger melt to determination. Harry looked up and over at the gargoyle guarding Dumbledore's office. It sat immobile, its sightless eyes staring straight ahead. "How do I control this?" he whispered, turning back to the wall under the window again. "How do I turn this into something...?"

He didn't just want to make cracks in the wall, or levitate desks, or make bloody snake enclosures at the zoo disappear. The boundaries of the magic he had been introduced to at age eleven seemed to be blurring all of a sudden...this made no sense. No, Harry would not refuse his training in the summer—in fact, as far as he was concerned, summer could not get there fast enough.

He stood up and made his way down the hall in McGonagall's wake, carrying with him the meanings of that thin breach in Hogwarts' legendarily indestructible shell. It meant that he would ignore McGonagall's warning to quit the DA. It meant that he would go ahead with his plans to prepare for certain jeopardy.

It also meant that if Voldemort wanted him, Harry would do everything in his power to be ready for him.

The magic fortifying the walls of the castle sealed the crack as Harry walked away, but it could not erase the--for Harry--undeniable message of such an occurrence.

Just a reminder: Author's Notes and Previews are in my profile.

--Kendra

Chapter 40 Prepare Yourselves

Part II

Harry walked without paying much attention to his surroundings. This was just as well; there wasn't anyone around anyway.

Everyone was down at the pitch; hundreds of students were filling the observation towers to the brim. Arms stuck out everywhere waving scarlet or emerald flags, twirling noisemakers, pumping fists...noise blanketed the oval parameter of the Quidditch playing field and was carried on the wind through the trees and the open windows in the castle.

Stomping, screaming, clapping, chanting...it was all an unintelligible drone to Harry as he ambled through the empty halls of the castle; thinking.

Professor--Headmistress--McGonagall had obviously convinced herself that she had a job to do and would not let him sway her. All right then...Harry had things to do as well and so he too would adopt this outlook. He could not let himself lose focus. He understood why he kept feeling such stark realization of how delicate time was, how fleeting the present; the calm before the storm. This was stillness before chaos. Right now, at this moment. When can I expect you, he thought, faintly hoping that Voldemort could somehow hear him. Tomorrow? The next day...? A month from now? How do you think you'll lure me into your so-called trap if I'm ready for you?

He was suddenly outside; the gentle sunshine touched his skin. Harry looked up at the sky as he descended the steps from the great entrance hall and began down the steep hill towards the path to the pitch. He had missed perhaps twenty or thirty minutes of the match. He realized that he would be asked where he'd been and what had happened to him in the showers earlier. He decided that it was perhaps fortunate he was so late—he would be spared sitting with Hermione and she wouldn't be able to give him the third degree until after the match.

He walked along with his hands stuffed in his pockets. The crack in the wall swam at the forefront of his thoughts. He didn't understand it. Well, he understood what it meant to him, but not what it was. Supposing McGonagall was right in her theory that it was only showing itself in a very basic, almost primal form where he couldn't tell what would happen from one moment to the next? He thought about what he knew caused its emergence up until now. As far as he could tell, it came out first and foremost when he became angry. Secondly, when he was trying to reach his Magical Center. Thirdly...thirdly it seemed to strengthen the alarming access he had to Voldemort's thoughts and emotions and visa versa.

Harry's feet moved of their own accord, and the scenery around him barely affected him as his mind worked. What he needed was to map out everything he knew, and try to connect the dots to the rest of it. Now came the part where he would need to use a bit of imagination.

After a little while of walking, he began to picture a long tunnel, just like the one leading down to the changing rooms from the Quidditch pitch, through which, from an unseen source, magical power flowed. He gave this power the form of spectral light tinted warm gold. This, he imagined, was what his normal, natural power would look like if one could physically see it and he, Harry, was made of the thick concrete walls of this tunnel; the vessel within which this energy was transported.

What happened to him when he was a child...they said he'd been touched by a curse...the Killing Curse, obviously. They said that because his mother died for him, her love and sacrifice provided him with an ancient protection that Voldemort had not anticipated. What kind of 'ancient' magic this was, Harry had no clue, but the effect was devastating to Voldemort. In fact, it was so destructive that it nearly killed the dark wizard and almost destroyed Harry's parents' house. McGonagall said that it left a mark on Harry...and Dumbledore said this mark was a connection...and Harry knew he was in many ways similar to Voldemort because of it.

'As you grow older,' were McGonagall's words, 'the signs of You-Know-Who's mark on you grow more and more unmistakable. You are more powerful than you realize...'

Harry imagined the calm, golden light of his normal magical energy disturbed by a fierce streak of bright red light that took over the former and shook the walls of the tunnel. This was his connection to Voldemort. This was the mark the dark wizard had given him. So now what? The fifteen year old wizard walked on, lost in thought, the slight breeze from the mountains rustling his hair as more cheers from the pitch reached his hearing. He imagined the Voldemort light dimming; almost hiding within the gold. But as time passed, and the walls of the tunnel--Harry--began to age, the red light would surge from time to time, nearly taking over the gold. He felt silly thinking about tunnels and different colored streams of light, but at the moment it was the best way he could make the connection. He wondered, fleetingly, what anyone would say about his methods.

He moved on...so this year...the dreams had gotten worse. He instinctively knew it had something to do with the fact that Voldemort had a body again; that he had restored himself to human form. Indeed, it was plain to the young man that as Voldemort had grown stronger, so Harry felt more unstable. He saw in his mind's eye the red light swelling, pulsing fit to swallow up the golden magical energy Harry naturally possessed, and then he saw the walls of his tunnel trembled with anger. And the anger made the red light cling to those walls and feed off of them. And Harry's imagination ran with him as he quickened his pace unconsciously, seeing the red light becoming unstable as the walls quaked and then the two lights merged and turned a dazzling white that expanded until it touched the walls, licking at them and making them shudder even more.

Harry knew this change within himself. He knew the feeling of himself shuddering and quaking like the tunnel in his mind. When he was confronted by Snape, when he had gone to find Draco, when he realized what Dumbledore was going to do for him the night Umbridge found the Room of Requirement...

It felt good, he realized. It felt good to lose control.

"Harry?" Tonks' voice startled him out of his contemplation and he turned to find her half-jogging down the hill behind him. She smiled at him as she reached where he was, catching her breath. Her platinum

blonde bob was now gone and replaced by slightly longer, dark brown hair. She no longer looked ten years older than she was supposed to be, either. Perhaps the spirit of the day inspired her to relax a little. He preferred her looking more like herself at any rate. "I thought that was you. Oversleep, did you?"

Harry shook his head no. "Not exactly...what about you?"

"I was up for most of the night working on lesson plans, among other things...had a bit of a late start." She had stopped just in front of him and he gave her a once-over. She wasn't wearing pinstriped or tailored robes today either, but the more casual style of dress he was used to seeing her in. "I was calling your name, but I guess you didn't hear. You seemed a little preoccupied. Anything the matter?"

Harry scoffed. "When isn't there something the matter?"

"You're right. Well, if it cheers you up any, I think I hear Gryffindor winning."

As if on cue, a swell of triumphant roaring was carried to them on the breeze coming from the mountains, followed by Lee Jordan's excited voice: "Gryffindor scores!" Harry smiled a little, glad to hear it. But then he let go of the smile as he realized that he no longer had a desire to go down to the pitch. His eyes wandered past Tonks' face and found in the distance the zigzagging, swooping figures of the players as they battled it out for the Cup. He knew Angelina was among them, working her arse off and keeping everybody else on their game. Harry sighed. "D'you fancy a walk? No point in trying to find seats down there now."

Tonks yawned and grinned at him. "I was thinking the same thing."

They turned and headed in a different direction, this time Harry's feet were carrying him towards Hagrid's cabin. He knew the gamekeeper was probably down at the pitch in his usual spot taking up two rows by himself in the Gryffindor observation tower. Tonks didn't seem to care which way they walked. There was something about her presence beside him that relaxed him, even cheered him up a bit. He stole a glance at her.

"So...you look like yourself again." He observed, nodding his approval.

"How do you know this is what I look like?" She wiggled her eyebrows at him, her smile becoming slightly wicked, and her hair actually seemed to turn almost crimson in the sunlight for a moment before the attractive illusion faded away again. "I could really have hairy warts and missing teeth for all you know."

Somehow Harry doubted that very much.

"Well, I like this version of you better, anyway." He saw her smile widen out of the corner of his eye. "Some of us were kind of confused by your choice--not that it wasn't brilliant the way you pulled it off. It just didn't seem like...you."

He understood he couldn't really pretend to know so much about Tonks that he was allowed to be telling her who she was or wasn't. He did feel, however, that he could at least be honest with her. It was the truth; he was glad she looked like herself today, and not like the self-possessed yet stern-looking woman she evoked as 'Professor' Tonks.

"That was sort of the point," she answered.

"What made you choose to look that way, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I thought it was a bit more appropriate than my usual," she admitted, shrugging as they approached the steep incline that divided the two paths from each other. "S'pose I wanted to be taken seriously. I figured I could hardly have done if I'd shown up looking like the novice at teaching I actually am. You didn't like it?" She sounded a little concerned, or rather self conscious.

They stopped on the mound of earth that dropped off to reveal the steep downward path to Hagrid's cabin and the vast blanket of trees behind it. Together they looked out at the scenery; they could see Fang napping in the grass near the enormous log that Harry and Ron

and Hermione sometimes found Hagrid sitting on when they came to visit.

It was Harry's turn to shrug. "You looked a bit too much like a Malfoy for my tastes. The blonde hair, the way you changed your face; it all reminded me of...well you looked a lot like Draco's mother," he paused, frowning, and added: "only with much shorter hair and an odder fashion sense."

"That's my mother, actually..."

At those words, Harry remembered as though the Black family tree was suddenly spread out before him that Tonks was related by marriage to the Malfoy's. Her mother was the sister of Narcissa Malfoy and Bellatrix Black-Lestrange. The Black family had disowned Tonks' mother for marrying a muggle. He remembered Sirius telling him Andromeda had been his favorite cousin. Had been; in the past tense. He didn't know the details of her death, and he couldn't really think what to say. Tonks didn't seem to be offended, though her smile faded as she squinted in the direction of the sun.

"She was killed when I was a little girl, but I remember...she had very short blonde hair and liked wearing suits..." The young witch gave a whimsical snort and turned back to him with her hand hovering above her eyes to shade them. "My dad said he was instantly attracted to her because she was so odd. And when he found out she was a witch, he said, he was done for. Isn't that funny?"

"Sounds about right to me..." Harry remembered Sirius' story about his mother slapping his father across the face. He was struck with an odd desire to apologize. "I didn't mean to imply that being related to her made your mother a bad person or anything..." he offered somewhat awkwardly. "It's just that the Malfoy's are nothing but trouble, that's all."

He concentrated on Fang, who seemed to be dreaming, while he waited for her response; the animal was kicking his hind leg and his ears were twitching madly. "I heard about what happened to Angelina, Harry. I'm sorry."

He nodded, lowering his eyes to his feet; the angering thought of some silent, dirty scuffle between Draco and Angelina invaded his mind briefly.

"I got to know her a little in class yesterday. She's quite impressive; very sharp and not shy at all, is she?" Harry agreed. Tonks squatted down and touched the grass at their feet; a small gust of wind laced its way into her hair and whipped it around as she moved her fingers through the crisp green shards. "Draco...my cousin...I'd almost feel sorry for him, if the things I've heard are true."

"Yeah, well don't." Harry said immediately, standing next to her, clenching his hands tightly in his pockets. He frowned at the wind in Tonks' hair. "He was a horse's arse before his dad did all that stuff to him and he still is; all any of that did was give him the excuse to be an even bigger, smellier one..."

"Well, I said 'almost' and I totally agree with you." She bounced upright again, this time chewing on a blade of grass. Harry found her amusing, even when he was irritated. "Still it saddens me...when I was a child I went through phases of being very hurt and very angry. My mother had no family but my dad and me; she seemed happy, but even as a little girl I think I could tell that being isolated from them affected her deeply." She chuckled at herself. "After she was gone, I used to sit and daydream what it would be like to know my aunts; to grow up with my cousins, if I had any..."

"Why would you want that, when they'd been so cruel to your mother?" Harry knew he sounded ironically narrow, but he couldn't help himself.

"Family is family, Harry..." came her patient reply. "You of all people should understand how I felt. Didn't you ever dream about your parents; what they would be like?"

"That's different."

"Yes...and no..." A half-smile played at her lips, the blade of grass bobbing up and down in the corner of her mouth whenever she spoke. Her eyes were narrowed at him; he couldn't tell if she were annoyed

with him or amused by him, which made him uncomfortable. “Do you want to know the truth?”

“Sure...”

“I’m not a child any more; I’m a grown woman...” she laughed. “Well, I’m older and I no longer daydream about my aunts or my mother’s side of the family.” The laughter died from her eyes and she looked away. “But...there’s still a part of me...I adopted my mother’s likeness probably hoping to be recognized by him.” Harry understood and immediately disliked that she meant Draco, her cousin. He remained silent. “If not accepted...at least recognized...” she sighed, then added: “...that is until I met him.”

Just like that, the glint of laughter returned to her eyes and Harry found himself snorting right along with her. Tonks’ mouth opened and the grass fell out.

“He’s a conceited little shit, isn’t he?”

Harry nodded his agreement and they laughed still more at Draco’s expense until a boisterous choir of voices could be heard from the pitch in the distance. He instantly recognized ‘Weasley is Our King,’ and stopped laughing. “Did you hear that?” he asked her, and she too paused to listen.

“Is that a song?”

Harry nodded. “Damn...” he remarked after a heartbeat. “Slytherin must be gaining on us.”

“Try not to listen. Just think positive thoughts, and before you know it, the Gryffindor team will come running up the hill with the Cup in their hands.”

“If you say so.”

“I do...” Tonks pulled out her wand and pointed it at a cluster of clouds that had settled in the sky directly above the cabin. “Stop listening. Here: I’ll distract you.”

She muttered an incantation and white sparks shot out of the tip, soaring high until they hit the cluster. Harry watched as she swirled her wand around unceremoniously and after a minute or so she had gotten the group of clouds to somewhat resemble a rabbit. She grinned over at him and he nodded his awkward approval of her handiwork. He wondered, offhand, what Andromeda had really been like: a witch who dressed sort of like a wizard, who had been made an outcast by her own family, but who still managed to live happily in love and raise an interesting, talented child.

There was a loud cracking sound, and a patch of treetops swayed ominously before their eyes until one of them began to tip and fall. Harry instantly knew that the giant was responsible. Tonks stared at the falling tree for a moment, probably thinking the same thing judging by the look on her face, before resuming her idle shaping of clouds. Harry didn't want to guess why the giant was tearing down trees.

The thought of Grawp brought back the fresh memory of his argument with McGonagall. Tonks continued to lazily draw figures in the clouds...a cat...an eagle...a unicorn...a sphinx...but Harry couldn't help thinking of all the things he should have said to the headmistress in the hall before he let her walk away from him.

"You've got something on your mind..." Tonks said quietly after a short while. Harry felt a little guilty—he hadn't been paying attention at all, and now she had stopped her drawing to gaze at him shrewdly. Her dark eyes studied him, unabashed, for a moment before asking, "Anything I can help with?"

"I don't know," he answered somewhat dryly, "can you convince Professor McGonagall to let me keep the D.A. going?"

"Ah..." she caught on, giving him an empathetic look. "You had a talk with her this morning? That's why you were late." He nodded. She sighed and turned to squint again at the sky. The last of her spell work, what looked like a griffin, was floating away in the direction of the pitch. It spread its wings as it went and gave a silent cry. "And she still hasn't changed her mind..."

"No, she hasn't." From the way she talked, he guessed that this had been discussed already in the 'gathering' that Alastor Moody spoke of the night before. Feeling a tinge of irritation from earlier, he shook his head stiffly, driving his fists deeper into his pockets. Harry made an effort not to sound overtly aggravated. "It isn't fair, Tonks--the idea that she would go to all this trouble to get me trained and not let me do the same for the D.A. It's just as bad as Dumbledore telling my friends to ignore my letters all summer; trying to make me suppress my power without telling me why...not trusting that I can handle the truth; not understanding that all I want is the truth and a chance to...to..."

He gave up trying to articulate exactly how he was feeling. It was all just a churning ball of angst. He felt like laughing at himself but instead opted to examine the retreating griffin as though he would be quizzed on its exact shape and density later. It was moving at a steady pace on the breeze—in a short while the students and faculty crammed into the observation towers would see it galloping towards them.

Tonks glanced over and took note of the resentment in Harry's green eyes. "It must be really frustrating for you, being kept in the dark so much."

"It is—very." Said the younger wizard quietly, shaking his head in a resigned sort of manner that told her he was far too used to such treatment. "I know I'm young, but I'm not a child. I can wrap my head around things a lot better than people give me credit for."

She nodded quickly. "Of course you can, Harry, that's obvious to me." It was her turn to fall silent. As they stood there together Tonks prodded the earth with the toe of her shoe, thinking. They didn't know each other that well—in fact this was perhaps the longest conversation they'd ever had. She felt for him, though...she really sympathized with him. But, most of all, she felt exactly the way he did about the D.A.

"It doesn't matter. I'm going ahead anyway; we did it under Umbridge's nose for months; we'll just keep it up under McGonagall's

now..." said Harry, disrupting her contemplation. His tone was resolute, though he did feel a small poke of apprehension for her reaction.

After a pause in which the only sound was that of the occasional roar of excited spectators coupled with Lee Jordan's commentary, she spoke. "Would it be all right if I joined? Or are teachers not allowed?"

Harry's head flew in her direction and he found his lips curving into a small. "Are you kidding? Of course that's all right! There's a meeting tonight, as a matter of fact."

"Good." The young Auror mimicked Harry's smile perfectly and winked at him. He watched her start down the hill towards Hagrid's cabin. "Let's go take Fang for a walk, and you can tell me what your plans are."

As he followed, he found himself feeling much better. Tonks joining the DA seemed like a step in the right direction; progress that no matter how slight still counted for something. They half-walked, half-skidded down the steep, rocky hill towards the cabin, and Fang woke up at the sound of their approach. He began barking almost immediately, happily spinning in a circle before rushing to tackle a laughing Tonks so that he could slurp her face affectionately.

Hermione rubbed her bottom, frowning as Hagrid stooped over to help her up again. "Sorry 'bout that, Hermione...!" he yelled over the deafening voice of Lee, who was calling out nearly every move being made on the pitch. "GO GRYFFINDOR!" roared the game keeper.

She muttered 'it's all right' and settled herself back onto her seat between Hagrid and Neville, rubbing her shoulder as well. Being knocked off of the bench twice had left her a little sore. This didn't bother her that much; it was her patience that was becoming bruised and sooner or later she would lose it completely. She had been trying to quiz Hagrid about the 'enormous problem' in the Forbidden Forest, but he'd been avoiding her questions by cheering overzealously and pretending he couldn't hear her. As a result, she was knocked to the floor twice because of his massive, flailing arms.

Determined, she turned partially in her seat and opened her mouth to ask the same question again, but just then Angelina had gained possession of the Quaffle after a very dangerous-looking battle for it with Montague and the entire Gryffindor tower shuddered with encouraging cheers for their captain. Lee piped up: "Angelina Johnson snatches the Quaffle! She's making a run for it...! Dodges a nasty bludger shot from Slytherin Beater Crabbe...she goes...she goes...SCORE!"

More structure-rattling applause; Hermione clapped along, though her eyes were focused on Hagrid. "Harry told me everything, Hagrid. It's all right...we're just concerned for you. You have to stop letting your brother hurt you like th--"

"THAT'S IT, RON!" shouted Hagrid suddenly, even though Ron was merely pacing back and forth on his broom, concentrating all his attention on the movement of the Quaffle. Several students glanced at Hagrid questioningly, but general applause rang out just the same. Hagrid, deliberately clapping the loudest, leaned over and whispered gruffly, "I can take care of meself, Hermione. As a mat'er of fac' Harry ought not t'ave told ya about Grawp at all; no one 'sides me and McGonagall're s'posed ter know, so yeh gotta keep quiet about it!"

"Maybe she's right, Hagrid?" Neville chimed in, absently twirling a noisemaker so no one could make out what he was saying. He leaned over Hermione as Hagrid glared at him in disbelief.

"He told you as well--?!"

"Yeah, and he also told us how close he and Angelina came to gettin' killed last night. Maybe—you know, for your own safety—you might want to just leave him be until McGonagall sends him away?"

Hagrid's bruised face turned blood red and he stood up abruptly, glaring down at the two of them in blazing defiance. Hermione shrank into Neville as several other Gryffindors turned to stare at the scene. Hagrid was rarely angry with anyone, let alone any of the students, but as he towered over the two DA members now he looked positively terrifying. "I don' wanna hear an'ther word about it, understand?" he said in a low, menacing voice.

Both of them nodded immediately. Hagrid blinked and some of his terrifying anger faded, but he handed his Gryffindor flag to Hermione, who timidly accepted it, and made his way past them to the exit. Several minutes and a cluster of disheveled spectators later, he had disappeared down the stairwell to the grounds.

Neville and Hermione exchanged looks. "I think maybe we shouldn't have mentioned it..." he shrugged, shifting on his seat again to continue watching the match. Hermione sighed heavily and did the same. As she was focusing on Ginny being chased by Draco Malfoy for the Snitch, she couldn't help feeling guilty. Perhaps she should have just left it alone—she didn't know where her head had been. She felt as if she was losing control or something. First, Harry refused to let her help him with his Occlumency skills and now Hagrid had actually become angry with her for trying to persuade him to abandon his efforts with the giant...

She didn't really even know why she was putting up so much resistance to Harry's New D.A. ideas...it wasn't as though his aims were that far from hers. It had been her suggestion to form the DA in the first place! In fact, she had actually been rather impressed with his plans. Ginny lost sight of the Snitch and Draco went on in search of it to no avail; Hermione shifted her gaze to Ron. The Quaffle was making its way toward him. He looked nervous but oddly focused...

"The Quaffle is being carefully guided past Gryffindor's defenses..." Lee was saying. "Almost there...Ron Weasley looks ready for it though...I hope...if Slytherin makes this score the match'll be tied at seventy points each..."

"Come on, Ron..." she whispered, actually gripping Neville's arm.

Every single spectator seemed to be holding his or her breath as the Quaffle got nearer and nearer Ron's net. The Weasley Keeper looked as pale as a ghost but he kept his eyes on the ball. Abruptly, the Slytherins struck up a chorus of 'Weasley is Our King' just as a large cloud shaped like a griffin galloped into the path of the sun, and Montague nearly knocked Katie Bell off her broom advancing towards Ron. He tossed the Quaffle high; it fell past Angelina's reach and

Montague rammed it with his broom—the griffin cloud passed over the sun and the sky brightened again just as Ron leapt upward from his broom like a Jack-in-the-Box and took the brunt of the zooming ball to the chest.

Everyone stood up at once, a collective gasp of astonishment passing through them like a tidal wave as the song died out abruptly. Lee Jordan lost his words as it looked like Ron would fall to his death. “BLOODY HE--!”

Ron reached out for his broom as he came crashing down, missed it, and continued sailing towards the ground. Hermione’s heart froze and she felt as though she would scream, but no sound would come. Her nails dug into Neville’s flesh so that the boy grimaced though he couldn’t tear his eyes away from Ron’s falling figure. Angelina screeched her Keeper’s name and swooped low as fast as she could—Ron plummeted into her but grabbed hold of her broom with his outstretched hand. All the players stopped moving to watch, even Draco Malfoy, whose face (though no one could really make it out) was stricken with anxiety.

They continued falling a little way because of Ron’s extra weight, but Angelina was able to steer them towards the lower tier of the Hufflepuff observation tower with difficulty. Ron’s feet dangled and finally touched down inside the tower and he dropped from Angelina’s broom like a sack of potatoes. Dead silence engulfed the pitch for a heartbeat, and then his copper top popped up again—he raised the Quaffle high in his hands and the entire student body (minus the Slytherins) erupted into the loudest and happiest applause yet.

Hermione did finally scream Ron’s name as her heart exploded with relief. She let go of Neville’s arm, but very quickly had to take hold of him again because she felt faint and nearly fell. “You all right?” he shouted, a smile on his face but concern in his eyes. She nodded, smiling as she caught her breath and calmed herself.

Ginny brought Ron his broom and he hopped on, waving to the crowd, a huge grin on his face. “What a wicked save by Ron Weasley! And well done, Angelina!” Lee bellowed to screams of agreement. Suddenly ‘Weasley is Our King’ started up again, only this time it was

the Gryffindors, and not the Slytherins who broke into song. Stomping erupted to accompany this triumphant version of the song Draco had penned.

Stomp, stomp, CLAP!

Stomp, stomp, CLAP!

“Weasley is our King!

Weasley is our King!

He didn’t let that Quaffle in!

Weasley is our King!”

Stomp, stomp, CLAP!

Stomp, stomp, CLAP!

“He can save anything,

He never leaves a single ring!

That’s why Gryffindors all sing:

Weasley is our KINNNNGG!!”

Even Headmistress McGonagall stood up and joined in—she watched Colin Creevy carefully to get the hang of the stomping and clapping part, and then beamed proudly up at her house’s Seeker, singing along in time with everyone else.

“There you have it, Hogwarts, a truly great Quidditch moment for you!” Lee commented over the choir of voices. “Now let’s get back to the match! Gryffindor still leads Slytherin seventy, sixty—can the

serpents move in for the kill and pass the Gryffindors? Or will Ron Weasley perform more death-defying feats to win the Cup for his team?!"

A mixture of boos from the Slytherins and cheers from everyone else erupted as Ron resumed his position and Madame Hooch tossed the Quaffle back into play. Hermione felt pride override any other feelings she might've had minutes before, and waved Hagrid's flag high, rooting for her team—but most of all for Ron.

Harry heard the loudest eruption of cheering yet and turned to peer in the direction of the pitch, intrigued.

Tonks cleared her throat and he turned back. She shook her head at him as a choir of voices rose up on the wind and the familiar melody of 'Weasley is Our King' reached their hearing. "No listening, remember? We'll find out soon enough."

"Yeah, you're right..." he didn't add that he had no idea why they had decided not to listen to the match. She was right to bring them back on topic, though. She had been breaking things down for Harry, after he told her of his plans for the D.A., about his training. She explained about being a decoy at Privet Drive, and about Moody's intention to teach Harry 'everything'. Harry listened, his imagination carrying him through all sorts of unnamed, complex spells and dueling methods. He thought about the manual Neville had been given, and the raw excitement he felt during those few hours of sparring with his fellow D.A. member. "I'm ready...summer get can't here soon enough..." he confessed.

They drifted into talk about Harry's power. He told her about the crack in the wall, Voldemort's attack on him outside the Room of Requirement, what he had done to Dumbledore's office, and even his attack on Malfoy. Walking along the very edge of the forest with Fang just in front of them, Harry found himself explaining his recent theory about what was happening to him, tunnel and lights included. He told her of his dreams...about the one he had in the showers that morning, and the drive it created in him to prepare himself for Voldemort's so-called trap.

"So he wants to lure you to the Department of Mysteries at the Ministry..." Tonks mused, tossing a stick and watching as Fang ran to catch it and bring it back. "He wants you to try for a prophecy? And you think it'll kill you to touch it, or else weaken you enough for him to finish you off?"

"Yeah, something like that..." Harry muttered, rubbing his chin and staring at his moving feet. "What I'm not sure about is what the prophecy says. I thought maybe it had something to do with Dumbledore, but McGonagall didn't seem to think so..."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. She wants me to look for this book; I'm to report whatever I find to her."

"The book is about the Department of Mysteries?" Fang came back and proudly presented her with the stick. She rubbed his head and tossed it again.

"Yeah—more specifically I need to look up something called the Hall of Prophecy, though. It's what we think I've been dreaming about all this ti--" Harry stopped walking with his mouth still open. Tonks took a few steps more before she noticed his abrupt halt. She turned to face him, a puzzled frown on her face as Harry's eyes narrowed in realization.

Tonks could see Harry's heart pounding through his shirt. She raised her eyebrows at him in alarm. "What is it Harry?"

Harry didn't speak right away; his brain was running at the speed of light. The dreams...they all made sense now. One in particular. It wasn't the most recent, or even the most terrifying—but it was the most important. He hadn't even realized! He hadn't even understood! But Angelina had told him that very morning, just after he woke up from this most important of all his dreams regarding the Department of Mysteries. Dumbledore, that wrinkled old codger, was absolutely right about the messages in dreams.

My name...he thought. Tonks stood looking confused, but remained silent, waiting. My bloody name was on that shelf! ‘Potter, Harry James...!’

Harry turned and began jogging back towards the castle. She hesitated, but followed with Fang on her heels. When they reached Hagrid’s cabin again she told the excited animal to stay put and easily caught up with him. “Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?”

He was staring straight ahead, his mind more focused and his head clearer than it had been in a long while. “Tonks, I need a favor.”

“Sure...”

“Could you come with me up to the library and get something out of the Restricted Section?”

“This book McGonagall wanted you to look up, right?”

He nodded and surged ahead, not feeling he was moving quickly enough. She kept up with him as they scaled the hill and crossed the vast front lawn. Both moved in urgent silence. Crossing the threshold of the grand entrance hall, they were taking the marble steps two at a time in seconds. As they walked, Harry voiced his theory—his revelation—to her breathlessly. “Both McGonagall and Ron told me very few people know much about the Department of Mysteries, or especially the Hall of Prophecy,” he said as they took the steps two at a time, “but just say it does exist...say it really does contain thousands of prophecies, kept under lock and key. Broderick Bode was an Unspeakable, but even he couldn’t remove the prophecy for Voldemort.”

“We thought maybe his rank wasn’t high enough...” Tonks breathed, getting a small hitch in her side as they finally topped the last flight of stairs and began racing through corridors to the library.

Harry shook his head, frowning at the marble floor, gesticulating as they went. “But, Voldemort spent months planning this—don’t you think he would make sure he got the right person for the job? With all the right authority or whatever?”

"Perhaps...but the theory was that You-Know-Who had been given the wrong information about Bode."

"Yes—meaning they told him Bode would remove it; should have been able to remove it; but he couldn't. He went mad." They stopped just outside the doors to the Hogwarts library. The halls were silent but for their faint breathing and Harry's hushed voice. "I had a dream that I forgot about until just now, outside...in it I'd reached the Hall of Prophecy for the first time, and I was about to take one of them down. I know it was the one he wants...it had my name on it."

Her lips parted in understanding, but she merely nodded for him to go on.

"It said 'Potter, Harry James' and when I saw it my whole body filled up with this burning excitement like I was about to take a drink of water after nearly dying of thirst...but then I woke up." Harry sighed and cupped his hands in front of him, as though he were holding a crystal ball. "My point is: I think the reason Voldemort wants me to go there so badly is because I am the only one who can remove that prophecy. I think—I know—this book will tell us that only a person whom the prophecy is about can touch it."

"Harry...what do you think this means?"

The boy wizard shrugged, but answered: "...maybe it has something to do with what's been happening to me this year. My power..."

"And the reason Dumbledore wanted this information kept from you...?" Tonks wasn't asking Harry; she had turned away to stare at one of the busts sitting on either side of the library entrance. Harry answered her anyway.

"Voldemort said in his dream 'you, my young fool, shall die at last...'. Dumbledore obviously knows Voldemort thinks there's something in that prophecy that'll tell him how to kill me. For all I know, maybe there is."

Tonks took a deep breath, finally recovering from their run across the grounds and through the school. She stared into his eyes, and as he watched she began to grow taller and more slender. Her skin paled; her hair shortened and faded several shades until it was that silvery blonde Harry was so familiar with. Her features aged and turned sharper—her eyes narrowed from warm intrigue to cool indifference. Finally, her robes changed before his eyes—she was once again the personification of Andromeda Tonks, and not the young Auror Nymphadora.

When she spoke, her voice was different as well. It was deeper and more serious, though it still held a trace of the old Tonks he knew. “What’s the name of the book?”

Harry dug in his pocket for the piece of parchment McGonagall had given him. He handed it to her. She touched him with cool fingers as she took it from him. Glancing over the title once, she nodded and headed into the library alone. Harry ran both hands through his hair to cool himself off a bit and crossed the hall to lean against the banister there.

After only a few seconds, leaning against the banister proved too stationary a position for him, and he began pacing between the busts flanking the library entrance. He didn’t have to wait long, though. Tonks returned shortly—without the book. “It isn’t there. I asked Pince if someone checked it out but she just clammed up like she didn’t know what I was talking about.”

As her mother’s doppelganger, she looked rather intimidating when she was disappointed. Harry found himself wondering how much like her sisters Andromeda actually was, aside from not hating muggles. He let this thought fade and stood contemplating the absence of Facing the Unspeakable for a moment. Obviously, it had been there—McGonagall would not send him on a wild goose chase...would she? No, he decided, she wouldn’t when it was so important. That meant someone had removed it without her knowledge...told Pince to keep quiet about it should anyone come looking...because he didn’t want Harry to go running to the Department of Mysteries in search of a prophecy with his name on it, thus falling into Voldemort’s trap.

"Dumbledore..." said the Boy Who Lived.

Tonks nodded as though she had already guessed the same thing.
"Yes I figured as much. That also confirms your theory, of course."

Harry started walking, shoving his hands into his pockets again. He agreed it did confirm his theory, but he still wanted to read that book now more than ever. Having it taken and kept away from him in this manner stoked the fires of curiosity and defiance in him. He scoffed—ironically, Dumbledore didn't seem to understand that the more he hid from Harry, the more determined the boy would become to find out the truth.

"When the match is over I have to find Professor McGonagall," he started as they descended the stairs again, headed back down to the Great Hall. "She's probably in contact with Dumbledore right?" She didn't answer but he knew he was right. Her hair fell into her eye as she walked along side him, her hands now also in her pockets. Harry turned to look at her. "Your mother was a pretty woman...and this style does suit her...but not you."

She didn't respond. He turned and looked straight ahead again, not knowing if he'd offended her or what.

After a pause he added, "Thanks for helping—and talking. You're still coming to the meeting tonight, right?"

A sort of half-smile and a nod from her. "Wouldn't miss it..."

They had reached the grand entrance hall—Harry planned to go down to the pitch and wait for McGonagall to come out. Just as he took the last step down the doors burst open and hundreds of people rushed inside at once. Huge grins and flushed faces flooded the hall like a raging river; the massive crowd was jumping up and down and dancing and singing all together like some weird ballet. 'Weasley is Our King' rang loud and clear, and for a moment Harry's heart sank until he saw that it was the Gryffindor flag everyone was waving around like mad. The amended lyrics to the dreaded song became

clearer to him as he and Tonks were besieged by students ranting and raving about Gryffindor's thrilling victory against Slytherin.

"See?" shouted Tonks as a few of his friends came up to them. "I told you, didn't I?"

"It was amazing!" Padma Patil gushed, and Lavender Brown nodded her head so fast and so hard Harry was afraid it would pop off. "Ron was brilliant—he made save after save and then--!"

"I caught the Snitch!" Ginny exclaimed, dislodging herself from a large group of congratulators and beaming up at Harry proudly.

He smiled and gave her a squeeze on the arm. "That's fantastic Ginny..."

She blushed. "Well, it was Ron who blew everyone away. He was the real hero of the game. He did so well, Harry, you should have seen it. Where were you?"

He opened his mouth to answer, though he didn't really wish to say in front of everyone, just as a particularly large cluster of people shoved their way inside. They were carrying a familiarly lanky, copper-topped boy holding the shining golden Quidditch Cup in his arms and an astounded grin on his face. 'Weasley is Our King' Version Two seemed to be coming the loudest and proudest from this group hoisting Ron into the air—Dean, Andrew, Jack, and two big seventh years were bouncing the boy up and down and roaring through the chorus as Hermione, Katie, Alicia, and Angelina stomped and clapped in the background. Hermione spotted Harry and waved happily. He waved back, but remained where he was, marveling at the sight of Ron given so much glory. He felt proud of his friend...and also a little disappointed he couldn't have been there on the field with him, working hard and sharing that feeling of triumph.

Angelina slipped through the crowd towards him, looking exhausted but very happy—so happy she seemed like a different person. Her skin was all aglow and her normally serious features were no longer clouded with concern or fear. She looked as carefree as one who'd

had a huge, long-standing pressure lifted from her shoulders. "Harry! I was looking all over for you!"

She embraced him, hugging him tight and making a wonderful, satisfied noise into his shoulder. Harry wrapped his arms around her waist and squeezed her into him. She smelled of sweat mixed with crisp wind and any number of other things mingled together from the day's exertions. Underneath all this was the faintest trace of her usual vanilla scent. He inhaled deeply...he loved the smell. When she released him, she had tears sitting in her eyes. Saying hello to Tonks, Angelina wiped the tears away and sighed.

"I don't think I've ever been so happy a Quidditch season is over...but it is, thank Merlin. And we won!"

Again, Harry felt bad he missed it. Not just because he hadn't played with them or even because he hadn't watched the moments they were all gushing about, but also because though he was happy for them, his happiness only reached a certain point where it died. He couldn't match their elation; he didn't have such powerful gladness inside him at the moment. The only thing he could do was stand looking in from the outside—as though he were crouching at the tiny window to the kitchens, smelling the wonderful smell of baking chocolate chip biscuits, but not being able to climb in and eat his fill.

This was because his mind and heart were focused on the knowledge that there was a prophecy sitting somewhere with his name on it, and it might just contain the secrets to the power inside of him...or worse...predict his death at the hands of the wizard they called the Dark Lord.

And Angelina seemed, in the span of a few seconds, to realize that Harry couldn't produce the kind of cheer that she herself felt. Her smile shrank a little, as she looked from Tonks to Harry. "Where were you? Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine; really...we can talk about it later." She opened her mouth to protest; something he was used to by now; but he spoke before she could. "You go and celebrate with everyone else, all right? I've got to find Professor McGon--"

He was cut off by a loud, collective gasp followed by whoops and catcalls and giggles erupting behind them. Harry, Angelina, and Tonks turned to see Ron in the middle of the huge crowd with Hermione pressed against him. Their eyes were shut and their lips were locked up in some kind of desperate dance for control...Ron was kissing Hermione as if she would disappear at any second. She was gripping the collar of his Quidditch robes, pressing herself against him passionately. Harry raised his eyebrows in utter shock.

"THREE CHEERS FOR WEASLEY!" someone bellowed—it was Dean sitting on Jack and Andrew's shoulders. Ron had passed him the Cup apparently just before he went to suck face with Hermione. "Hip, hip--!"

"HOORAYYYY!"

Harry looked around, feeling something dawn on him. Everyone looked so damned happy...especially his close friends...especially his girlfriend. And he had a strong desire just then, coupled with everything else, not to spoil her happiness right now. The carefree look on her face as she'd come up to him was too precious. This moment seemed to be frozen in time; something surrounding him but that did not reach him the way it ought to have. It could've been something they might all remember one day, every one of them, as one of the last truly joyful moments they would share. His news could wait.

Angelina said something to him that was lost in the din, and she was quickly swallowed up by congratulators. Ginny was pulled away by a few of her fellow fourth years. The noise rose up and up as even more people pushed their way in from the grounds—Harry spotted McGonagall's gold feather and tried to follow it, yelling pointlessly to Tonks that he'd be right back.

He began to push his way through the crowd, calling Professor McGonagall's name as he did so. People tried to stop him; shake his hand, clap him on the back, ask him if he saw this move or witnessed that save...Harry simply shook his head as he shook them off with his eyes glued to that golden feather bobbing along a few feet ahead of

him. He didn't understand how he had gotten so far way from the marble stairs between the time he and Tonks stepped down into the entrance hall and now...

He found himself face-to-face with Ron and Hermione all of a sudden. He paused, watching as they stopped kissing for a moment and the redeemed Gryffindor Keeper leaned over and whispered something in the bushy-haired girl's ear. She blushed as he continued whispering, his brow rutted—he was absolutely serious about whatever it was he was saying. Harry thought he recognized that look.

Hermione had tears suddenly...she smiled tenderly at him and whispered something back. Her mouth formed 'olive juice' or something similar. Harry felt maybe he shouldn't be staring at them—it was obviously a significant moment. He was turning to keep moving in the direction McGonagall was heading when Ron spotted him and reached out a hand, clapping him on the shoulder and pulling him forward. "Harry! Harry, did you see? Did you see the match?!"

Hermione blinked at him, but didn't report that he'd missed the match to Ron. "I saw a bit--yeah. You were brilliant, Ron."

Ron's cheeks flushed and he ran a hand through his longish red hair. "I was brilliant, wasn't I? Of course, they might've had to Scourgify my intestines from the pitch if Angelina hadn't caught me..."

"Oh, Ronald!" Hermione gasped, clamping a hand over her mouth.

Ron went on, and as he recounted his saves to them excitedly, Harry lost hope of catching up to McGonagall now. He forced himself to be patient. This was Ron's shining moment, after all. As preoccupied as he was, Harry wasn't heartless. He could celebrate a little before going to see the Headmistress. The hall slowly began to quiet down—students were filing into the Great Hall for a late lunch. Harry realized that he was starving, having skipped breakfast. He could do with some chowder and warm, buttered bread. Since McGonagall hadn't gone that way, Harry knew she was probably in the Head's office by now. Tonks congratulated Ron on her way to the staff table.

The Slytherins dragged themselves in last...the festivity didn't die down for them. Instead 'Weasley is Our King' broke out again among the remaining student body. The Slytherins scowled but said nothing. Harry did not see Snape, Montague the Slytherin captain, or Draco Malfoy.

Kids kept coming up to them to congratulate the team while they ate, and Harry was glad because it afforded him an excuse to avoid questions about his whereabouts during the match. Hermione seemed content and unbothered, though every now and then she would look at him expectantly as if to convey to him that he should know what was coming. She had called a truce for now, but he knew soon she would drill him mercilessly. He wouldn't mind telling her, either—he wouldn't mind telling all of them. He planned to at the right time, during the DA meeting later that night. He tried to convey that message to her as they sat there.

When lunch was over, Dean and Seamus announced the celebration would continue in the common room all afternoon till dinner. Neville had been dragged into a lunch-long conversation with Luna Lovegood, and when he finally broke away he joined Harry as they climbed the stairs.

"You all right, Harry?"

Angelina was walking ahead of them with Katie and Alicia; Ron and Hermione were a floor above them already. Harry nodded. "Yeah; fine. Why?"

"I heard from Lee Jordan about you injurin' yourself in the showers this morning. Looked all over for you..."

Harry glanced at Neville, who was watching his own feet, before sighing and flexing his healed hand. "Something happened, but...we'll save it for later all right?"

"Sure..." said the other boy, and they walked on in silence. Once they reached the floor where the Head's office was located, Harry headed in its direction, asking Neville to tell the others he'd be back shortly.

"USELESS COCK-UPS!!" roared Montague, kicking a bench over viciously. "Every last one of you...!"

The entire team, save Draco, wore expressions of embarrassment, anger, and failure on their faces as they listened to Montague's scathing rebuke. Draco stood near his locker, his arms folded, an expression of indifference settled on his pale features. Montague didn't seem to notice or care, however, as he continued yelling every insult he could think of until he had to pause to regain his breath.

When he calmed down a bit, he pointed his wand at the lot of them threateningly. "I should hex the living piss out of all of you; you sorry sacks of--!"

"Why don't you just belt up, Montague?" interrupted Draco, a deep frown now disturbing his nonchalant expression. No one moved or spoke except Grabbe and Golye, who raised their eyes to Draco questioningly. They obviously feared punishment by association, and looked horrified that Draco was talking back.

Montague raised his eyebrows at the fifth year Seeker. "What did you just say to me, fifth year?"

"You heard me..."

The furious Slytherin captain took a step in Draco's direction, clenching his jaw menacingly, his wand still aimed. "No—I don't think I did. Why don't you say that a little louder?"

Draco stood up straight and uncrossed his arms. His fellow team members were now looking from Montague to him and back anxiously. One or two even looked somewhat cheered at the prospect of a fight. Crabbe and Goyle seemed confused as to who they should be more intimidated by. "I said shut it!" Draco shouted suddenly. "You're blaming us for what happened when you could just as easily blame yourself! It was your idea to use Johnson's plays—but she bested you, so we lost, get it?"

"What?!" Montague raised his wand higher; pointing it right at Draco's face. Unafraid but suddenly furious, Draco retrieved his as well, and

the group of teammates seated between the two hastily cleared the bench. “Better than me? Some bitch blood-traitor is better than me at Quidditch?”

“That’s right...” Draco replied. “You’re the useless cock-up Montague. I stole those plays for you and it did fuck all to improve our chances because we still lost. You’re a lousy captain and this is a lousy team.”

“Then it is perhaps fortunate that come next year you will no longer be a part of this ‘lousy team’, isn’t it Draco?” said a cold, low voice from the doorway behind Montague. All eyes turned to see Professor Snape standing there, looking livid but quite in control. Anyone familiar with the kind of anger Snape was known for would immediately recognize that his quiet, calm manner was nothing but the prelude to serious trouble. Montague gave a faint smirk—Draco merely met Snape’s gaze, but said nothing. After a long moment of silence, the Head of Slytherin House shifted his cold gaze to the team captain. “And you, Montague...resorting to pilfering another team’s plays?”

The tall, broad-shouldered captain opened his mouth to reply, his dark eyes shrinking with what looked like embarrassment, but Snape held up a hand for silence. With the slightest crease in his brow his fury became more pronounced, though he remained in control of himself. Draco watched, somehow both unaffected and very anxious, as the scene unfolded. The words, you will no longer be a part of this ‘lousy team’ echoed faintly in his mind. He pondered what this meant, exactly, as Snape took a few more steps into the room and continued addressing Montague.

“You might as well have handed the Cup over to the Gryffindor captain yourself; there was obviously no need for a match.”

“I’m sorry sir,” muttered the young man, eyes burning a path of resentment into the professor’s. “I know you’re disappointed, but it’s just that Flint’s plays were so--”

“Disappointment,” Snape cut into him harshly, “is a serious understatement, Montague. I’m a great deal more than disappointed I ever made you captain; you’ve embarrassed me, yourself, this team,

and Slytherin House! Bested by a Weasley?!" He turned sharply to glare at Draco as he said this, no doubt referring to both players' showdowns with Ginny and Ron. "At least Flint was capable of executing some sort of strategy; not stolen from the enemy but furnished by his own mind, you imbecilic boy!"

Silence cloaked the room; so thick and so menacing that no one's eyes rose to meet the professor's at all, not even when he addressed them again.

"If you're going to use someone else's ideas, at least make it your business to improve upon them! This match was a fiasco! Detention for the remainder of the term; all of you..." There was a murmur of disenchantment and the shuffling of feet, but the team remained silent as Snape continued stonily, "I sincerely hope none of your parents had any substantial investments in well-paid Quidditch careers for any of you—count yourselves lucky if even your own children can live down today's gargantuan failure," he snarled angrily. "Though my guess would be not—especially if those pea-brained Gryffindors have anything to say about it." Montague looked for all the world as if he would like nothing more than to destroy anything within cursing distance—preferably Snape or Draco—but he merely clenched his jaw in silence. Snape watched him for a minute more until he was satisfied he'd made his point, then dismissed them. "Get out of my sight; the lot of you!"

Draco readied himself to leave with the team. Snape watched him come forth, but held up a hand to stop him, a deep frown etched into his already unpleasant features. The boy stopped and waited, feeling the bite of apprehension inside.

Once the last of the team had gone, Snape sighed deeply and nodded for Draco to take a seat on one of the benches across from him. He did as he was told, his mouth clamped shut and his pulse beginning to race. Snape looked...burdened...remorseful, almost...yet still bitterly angry. If not for those other elements to his expression, Draco would assume that his godfather wished to berate him extra hard for the team's loss; perhaps for consenting to steal the playbook, perhaps for not catching the Snitch; perhaps...

"You've been expelled, Draco," uttered the dark wizard. His voice broke into the silence very softly; almost gently; but the words shattered something in the boy sitting across from him as though he had struck him.

Draco blinked, opened his mouth; closed it and breathed through his nostrils...his body felt heavy...he felt as though the walls of the locker room were sagging like syrup until they came down on him, coating him. He spoke finally, and just as quietly as Snape.

"Expelled..."

His mission...? How was he to complete the task his father had given him if he were sent home now? And...Angelina...? What would he do if he were sent to his mother; never to return to Hogwarts again if his enemies had any say in the matter? He said none of this, but the thoughts rent his mind in two, making him grimace at his Head of House.

"Yes," Snape went on stiffly. "You will be allowed to sit your O.W.L. exams and finish out the term, but at year's end you will no longer be a student at Hogwarts..." Those black eyes bored into him, shining with something that both puzzled and upset the boy who sat receiving this news with so many mixed feelings it was hard for him to speak.

He swallowed thickly; the knot in his throat pushing down the shaky adrenaline within him. "This is Potter's doing?"

"Certainly," Snape gritted. "He...confided...in our new Headmistress. He told her everything you have done to Angelina Johnson. Your obsession with her; your attack on her; stealing from her..."

Draco closed his eyes briefly. "Did you tell her why?"

Snape paused, gathered his robes, and kneeled before the sitting boy, drawing Draco's eyes to his as he did so. He ignored Draco's question. "There is more—she's sending you to Durmstrang." Draco's lips parted slightly, but the elder wizard continued speaking. "In Durmstrang, you will find a vastly different view of the wizarding world and the education of its youth...in such a place you will be

surrounded by nothing but those devoted to the old ways...you will be submerged into the unwavering mindset of the pure blood aristocracy..."

"Durmstrang--"

"Oh yes—and once the Dark Lord learns of this he will take interest; mark my words. There are minds there waiting to be influenced, but first and foremost your own...you have been taught to tolerate the meek views of Dumbledore's ilk, but not in Durmstrang, Draco. Do you understand me?"

Snape's calm voice was now shaking. Draco nodded. "I understand. Let McGonagall expel me if she wants! I'll go where I belong! Father would be pleased! To hell with Hogwarts!"

The elder wizard's eyes flashed but he let Draco fume for a few moments before continuing. "The Dark Lord will take interest...I know him...and he will want you there to be his very first pair of eyes and ears. Do you know why?"

"Minds waiting to be influenced?" repeated the Malfoy heir, his fists still clenched and jaw like a vise. Silently, Professor Snape nodded. Draco went on, "...first and foremost my own? What does that mean?"

"It means the Dark Lord will want to speak to you; to test you; to search you and judge if you are worthy to do his bidding. It means, Draco, that we must prepare your mind..." Snape spoke with the heaviest sense of reverence—it enthralled the young, impressionable boy. "You must learn Occlumency."

"Occlumency..." It sounded vaguely familiar to him. Again, Snape nodded as he stood up, letting the hems of his robes fall back into place at his feet.

"Come down to my office in the dungeons after the evening meal tonight. Eight o'clock."

Draco said nothing as he watched his godfather and mentor leave the locker room.

Durmstrang. This word echoed in his mind—it held such meaning...such...magnitude. Things were changing so fast. Draco closed his eyes and tried to calm his spinning thoughts. He pictured himself, in the bitter Bulgarian cold, somber and hardened by his father's influence and his position in the world. He pictured kneeling at a pleased Voldemort's feet; given cool praise and shown as an example to faceless Death Eaters who observed Draco being rewarded for doing what no one else seemed to be able to: delivering Harry Potter. His reward...a lovely vision...Angelina waiting for him in some lush bedchamber somewhere...draped in sheer, silken fabrics that clung to her gorgeously shaped body...

But first thing was first...

First thing, my son, echoed his father's voice from the dim light in the locker room. He looked up as out of the shadows stepped the imposing form of the Master Malfoy. First thing—complete your task. Release the giant, take the girl and draw Potter in to his death.

"The girl..." spoke Draco, softly to himself, his eyes unfocused as he stared at the embodiment of his contemplation.

The imaginary father figure nodded slowly. Yes, the girl. You must take her, Draco. She is the key.

"All this over a girl," he muttered, remembering what he'd said to Potter in the Ravenclaw locker rooms one cold winter night. Draco would bring them the girl. Yes! The whole thing—his complete plan—was suddenly laid out before him as clear as day. He knew exactly what he would do. It had occurred to him fleetingly the night before, though he couldn't see past his own desire to how he could have what he wanted and complete his task at the same time. But now he knew for certain this was the way.

He stood up purposefully and marched out of the locker room. He would need help, but also he would need to be very careful. Oh the plan was the thing, and he had it all mapped out. It was time to

commit himself; time to prove himself. With the ultimate goal firmly tucked away in his hard little heart, Draco went out to secure the first thing he would need to complete his mission.

Minerva felt a little better.

Her team had won the Cup, and not only that, but the victory was truly amazing. She had been so impressed by Ron Weasley (indeed, all of her team members and Angelina Johnson's leadership especially) that she couldn't resist joining in on the fun as the Slytherin House's spiteful song was turned on its head.

She had been very nearly tempted to break up the massive clog in the grand entrance hall as she passed through, but decided against it. Let them have their fun, she thought contentedly to herself as she watched their young faces. This entire year has been a disaster...let them enjoy this moment for as long as they can.

Now she was walking briskly towards the Head's office—she had been delivered a message by Filch as she was leaving the pitch. Minister Fudge was on his way. Minerva could only imagine what the hell he wanted; probably to question her staff (and certain of her students) about Albus' whereabouts. She had seen the papers: he needed a distraction from the debacle with Umbridge. She was making up her mind how she would handle the situation...if he wanted to use Veritaserum, the answer would be absolutely not. She could mention that a certain somebody's scandal involving the truth agent might not warrant such a tactic. If he wished to interrogate Harry Potter—again, out of the question. Fudge wouldn't try to force her, would he? Not with everything that recently transpired...

She was approaching the gargoyle, the official announcement of Fudge's arrival from the Ministry clutched in her hand. She spoke the password firmly and waited. The stone figure moved, but not in the way it was supposed to. It lowered its head, to her surprise, and looked at her with its smooth, pupilless eyes. Minerva looked back at it...she hadn't seen it act this way in a very long time...

She waited.

"Headmistress, the walls have been breached...not by an enemy..." it growled, and her mouth fell open slightly in astonishment as it continued, "the boy...the boy with the scar...here in this hall...the defenses have been penetrated...not by an enemy...here in this hall...the walls have been breached--"

"Thank you..." breathed the headmistress, lowering her gaze from its eyes and staring straight ahead. Her heart was pounding now...she swallowed thickly as the gargoyle resumed its former position and then moved aside for her. The spiral stair came down and she stepped forward with the hard, unnatural voice of the gargoyle echoing in her ears.

The walls had been breached...? By Harry? In the hall...

Minerva remembered the look of defiance on his young face as she left him earlier that morning. He'd been standing there, looking as though he was torn between his respect for her and his obvious frustration with her denying him Dumbledore's Army. Had he really been so angry...so much so that he could...somehow...breach the protective magic embedded in the walls? What was she to do with such a thing?

Use it, her instincts called out to her, loud and clear.

That vision of Potter leading an army of young students across a battlefield towards their deaths came upon her again as she entered the Head's office and closed the door. Eyes turned her way, though no one spoke as she crossed to the desk and sat down behind it. She closed her eyes...one by one the problems she was facing came to her. Severus...Potter's training...the Malfoy boy's expulsion...the mystery of this prophecy...Cornelius...the gargoyle's message...

She set aside the announcement from the Ministry and checked the time. Cornelius was due in an hour. Until he arrived, she could start by writing the first of two letters she needed to send out tonight. This one would go to Narcissa Malfoy and the next to the Headmaster of Durmstrang Institute for Magic, Igor Karkaroff. She sat and thought over her words carefully, then picked up a crow feather quill and began to write. She took her time, allowing the ink to sink into the

parchment; softly blowing on each finished line of script until it dried. This calmed her...allowed her thoughts to settle...the clock ticked steadily as she wrote.

"How are you finding it, Madame McGonagall?" asked Phineas Nigellus from his portrait after a while. He was examining his nails when she glanced up at him. He paused to look down at her, his eyebrows raised expectantly. "It seems Dumbledore has left you with some rather large orders to fill...expelling, training, interrogating suspect Order members...all quite dramatic, wouldn't you say?"

"What's your point, Phineas?" asked Minerva, finishing the letter and setting it aside to start a new one.

"Mmm...it was just an observation."

"Many of your observations would be better kept silent, I find..."

Phineas straightened his back stiffly. "Is that so?"

"It is indeed." Minerva dipped her quill into the ink jar sitting on the edge of her desk and resumed writing her letter without looking up. Phineas huffed indignantly and walked out of his portrait with his nose turned up. Frowning, the headmistress finished the second letter and rolled them both up separately, sealing them with the Hogwarts crest in crimson wax. Just as she had finished, a knock sounded throughout the silent office. "Come in," she answered, and Harry Potter stepped inside, looking grave.

Sighing, Minerva was sure she felt the very last inkling of the afternoon's cheerfulness disappear as she watched the Gryffindor boy close the door behind him and cross the room. "The book wasn't there," was all he said.

She clasped her hands together across the desk and stared at him, wanting to mention what the gargoyle had told her but for some reason holding back. "...someone borrowed it?"

"No—it's just missing. Pince acts like she can't say who took it, but I know it was Professor Dumbledore."

"I see..."

"There's more."

She observed him shrewdly over her spectacles. "Go on Potter."

Harry licked his lips and started to speak. He told her what he had realized that afternoon. She listened intently, nodding every once in a while as he explained that he realized the prophecy could only be removed by him because it was his...it was about him. Whatever it contained, Voldemort desperately wanted to get his hands on it so he could use it against Harry.

"Dumbledore knew this all along...that's why he's been trying to get me to stop having those dreams. He doesn't want me going to the Department of Mysteries because he thinks it'll lead to my death."

"Surely it would Harry, in one way or the other, if you were to go there." They looked across at each other, matching expressions of solemnity on both the elder and the younger face. McGonagall recognized something else, however, and she nodded at him in understanding. "But of course--you believe otherwise, don't you?"

Potter hesitated, frowning deeply; choosing his next words carefully. "I want to talk to him myself..." he said finally. She understood he meant Albus. "I want to ask him," Harry gesticulated haltingly; she could sense his frustration, his determination, his battle within himself to find himself in such a world of trouble at every turn as he continued, "I-I want to ask him face to face about the prophecy. I think he knows way more than he's telling you or me..."

"Yes, I feel the same way."

"And you know how to contact him, don't you? Please, Professor...I need to talk to him. I need to know where that book is. Maybe I don't have to go to the Department of Mysteries to figure these things out. If Dumbledore would just tell me the truth..."

"Trust me, Potter," answered Minerva, "you aren't the only one looking for the whole truth from Albus Dumbledore." Sighing again, she nodded at the young man standing before her. "Very well. I'll contact him for you. I cannot guarantee he'll agree to this, but you deserve at least to be heard, I think."

"Thank you." She could tell by the look that passed his features briefly that he wanted to ask why she was so willing in this case when she had not been at all obliging in the case Dumbledore's Army earlier. She would answer him that, if she only knew herself. The gargoyle's words came back to her. She envisioned Harry standing outside in the hall, fuming, and the walls crumbling all around him as the power seeped out of his very pores. "Professor...?"

"Yes Potter?" she nearly whispered. The clocked ticked away. Fudge was due any minute.

"There's something else...something that happened earlier..."

"You breached the wall."

Harry blinked in surprise. "Yeah; how did you...?"

"I know what you want to say. The point you want to make about what you did and how it affects Dumbledore's Army...now is not the time to discuss it."

Naturally, he wanted to protest, but she reached over and picked up the letters she'd finished, handing them to him.

"Take these to the owlery and send them off, will you?"

He took them just as Cornelius Fudge appeared in the fireplace engulfed in green flame. He stepped out of it brushing his robes irritably, followed by Dawlish and Kingsley Shacklebolt again. Percy Weasley emerged last; he was the first to notice Harry but he didn't give any greeting. Harry stood with the letters in his hands and watched them all step out of the fireplace one by one, a slight frown

in his expression. When Fudge noticed him, he glowered. “Potter— are you here to tell me where I can find Albus Dumbledore?”

“No.” Harry’s flat tone made the minister’s eyes narrow to slits and he crushed the rim of his bowler hat in anger.

“Of course not...well if you’ve got nothing useful to say, I suggest you leave us. This is a private meeting and students aren’t permitted. Percy?” At his boss’ glance, Percy strode across the room and opened the door for Harry. The letters in hand, Harry walked out on them without looking back.

Cornelius gestured for the Aurors to flank the door as Percy closed it behind Harry. Minerva sat waiting, her hands crossed on the desk. Fudge began to pace in front of her, watching his feet and clasping his bowler hat in both hands behind his back. He spoke to her in a sort of exasperated, somewhat disenchanted tone.

“Minerva, there’s no use skirting the issue—I’ve come straight away from a meeting with the Aurors I have heading the search for Dumbledore—” he indicated Kingsley with a nod of his head in the Order member’s direction. Minerva glanced at him; their eyes met and conveyed understanding in an instant before she turned her attention once again to Cornelius. “—and they’ve received reliable intelligence that Dumbledore’s been spotted in Varna...” he turned to face her finally, rocking on his feet with an air of patient expectancy. He seemed to think by telling her this it would spark a need to confess something to him.

She blinked at him passively. “Varna...”

“Yes, Varna. More specifically the sea port we’ve hidden from the Muggles there...” again he watched her carefully as though some secret hung on her lips; waiting for whatever confession she might offer; he rocked on his feet, his eyebrows raised as high as they would go, “...where the ship that patrols the Black Sea, policing the mer-tribes, is known to dock this time of year...?”

Again, no response from Minerva. Fudge closed his eyes and blew air through his nostrils and lips like an ill tempered walrus before he

resumed his pacing and spoke again with more fortitude and authority this time, seemingly determined to finagle some kind of information out of McGongall before he left the Head's office. She thought perhaps he believed if he kept telling her what he knew about Dumbledore's movements she'd say to herself 'the jig is up—they know too much; might as well confess everything'.

"Of course the ship has wards on it that make it UnPlotable, but Aurors are being sent to scour the waters for it as I speak. There's no doubt in my mind that Dumbledore is aboard. And knowing this, Minerva, I cannot help but conclude that he would not be there unless he intended to conduct serious business of a certain kind..." he looked at her again, this time as though looking at a misbehaving child caught in the act. She sat patiently waiting for him to get to the point. "You know why he's gone to negotiate passage on that ship, don't you?"

"Minister, I'm sure you're going to tell me..." said the headmistress wearily.

Minister Fudge became incensed suddenly, and he threw his bowler hat to the floor, brandishing a pointed finger at her and nearly shouting, "He's trying to rouse King lordan, isn't that obvious?! Do not play me for a fool, Minerva; you know what I'm talking about! Why else would he go there? Why else would he board that ship?"

She stood from her seated position, placing her hands flat on the desk and looking him square in the eyes. "Cornelius, I'm going to say this for the last time, and try to hear me because this is the truth: I do not know where Albus is. If you tell me he's been spotted on the Black Sea, then fine—he's been spotted on the Black Sea. If you tell me you have sufficient evidence that he intends to parley with King lordan—so be it. Go and pursue him; capture him; bring him back and try him for whatever crimes you believe he's committed. But you will do it without any word from me—I have a school to run and I'm afraid I'll be very little help to you." She crossed her arms and watched him sputter indignantly. "Now, unless you wish to know which house won the Quidditch Cup this morning, I'm afraid I have nothing to report to you today. Good afternoon to you all."

Cornelius glared at her for a heartbeat, and she met his gaze head on, unwavering. After it seemed he'd come to the conclusion that she spoke the truth, he turned and nodded at the Aurors flanking the door. They abandoned their positions and stepped toward the fireplace again. Kingsley picked up the bowler hat and handed it to the minister whilst Percy ignited the floo and stepped in first, then Dawlish.

Minister Fudge led Kingsley toward the green flames, but paused before he stepped in. "Minerva...Dumbledore is starting something out there; I know it. He's gone to convince the Mer-King to join him in his quest for power and so help me I will stop him..." he sounded as though he felt sorry for her that her beloved Dumbledore would be hunted down like a criminal. She didn't speak. "You'll stay out of the way—mark my words—you will, or you'll be taken down with him. Forgive me, but that's just the way things have to be. I will not let the Ministry fall prey to this madness."

"And I am sorry you feel that way, Cornelius. Good luck."

Nodding brusquely at her, he put on his hat and was swallowed by green flame. Kingsley glanced at Minerva once. The words "...forty-eight hours..." escaped his lips before he too disappeared. She understood this to mean that he would stall the search effort so that she could warn Albus that he'd been spotted.

Alone again, she reached for another piece of parchment without hesitation. Urgently, she wrote a third letter and seconds later had fetched another phoenix feather, throwing it to the ground.

Harry had made it all the way down to the last landing leading to the grand entrance hall before looking to see who the letters were addressed to.

He tried to remember where he'd heard that Malfoy's mother once refused to let his father send him to Durmstrang. He tried to picture what look would come across her icy, snobbish features when she read the letter McGonagall wrote informing her of her precious child's expulsion. He allowed himself a slight, bitter little smile as he cleared the landing and started across the entrance hall. The doors were slightly ajar; a thick line of warm sunlight reached out to him even

though the sun was receding into the mountainside as the afternoon wore on. In a matter of hours, after the evening meal, Harry would have to make his way to the Room of Requirement for the first DA meeting since Dumbledore had fled arrest.

He wondered what people's reactions would be to his news—how would they take him asking them to get even more serious; to get ready to fight for their lives and the lives of the other students? What would Zach Smith say when Harry told them he knew for a fact Voldemort was planning to infiltrate Hogwarts somehow? Would he be snide and dismissive, or would he be too scared to commit, or would he step up to what Harry was asking of them? What would Katie Bell say, 'that's your problem, Potter, not ours'...?

Harry thought about this all the way to the owlery and back; when he was finally in the common room again it was chock full of Gryffindors still talking excitedly about the match. Not many heads turned his way as he climbed through the portrait hole—most kids were listening to Ron explain exactly what he was thinking when he made the miraculous save one of the Patil sisters had mentioned to Harry earlier.

Hermione was standing behind Ron's armchair, leaning against a windowsill with her arms folded, watching the faces of the students gathered around them. Harry stood by, listening in as Ron went on dramatically: "...I just knew I had to catch it, no matter what. Angelina was counting on me, you know. I couldn't let her down!"

Harry snorted quietly, a lighthearted smile reaching his lips as Ron continued.

"And there I was, a split second away from the moment of truth...I just jumped. My brain was completely blank, mate. No thoughts; just action. Didn't even care if I fell to a squishy death. Gladly risk me life again and again for Quidditch, I would..."

Harry gave an enthusiastic clap with the rest of Ron's reverent fans and chuckled, letting his eyes roam now across the space in search of Angelina. He spotted her chatting with Katie, Alicia, and Dean to

the left of him. They were all grouped together on the chaise lounge; Angelina was squeezed in the middle.

He watched her for a moment before she noticed his presence and their eyes met. They didn't need to speak or gesture to know what they both wanted to do. Politely she excused herself and stood up. The others glanced at him briefly before continuing their conversation. Harry thought he heard Malfoy's name come from Ginny's mouth; he smirked at the thought of the two letters now sailing through the air in the school post owl's clutches. Angelina led the way up the stairs towards the boys' dorms. They walked the familiar ten or so steps down the narrow hall in silence until they reached his door. Angelina pushed it open...the quiet hum of conversation from below fell away as Harry closed it behind him.

She looked back at him once before she turned around and settled herself at the foot of his bed, sighing softly. "So...are you going to tell me where you've been all day?"

He took a deep breath and sat down on Ron's bed adjacent to her. He didn't want to be too near her before they got this part over; he knew that his urge to touch her would lead to other things and it was best to focus on the passing of this information first. He did look at her, however. His eyes drank in their fill. She had tucked her long legs under her and leaned back on her hands. The happy glow he noticed downstairs when she came rushing up to him was even more of a handsome radiance now that aroused him tremendously. The sun had turned her skin a golden dark brown and how soft it looked on her exposed arms and neck and cheeks...

"I had another vision this morning, in the showers." She opened her mouth. He shook his head immediately and she hushed so he could continue. As he spoke he looked into her eyes but also his gaze roamed. The outline of her breasts was just visible under the thick fabric of her Quidditch robes. "I know you want to say something about Occlumency, but honestly I'm not worried about it anymore; not right now."

"What did you see?" Angelina blinked at him expectantly.

He took a breath and explained everything; the dream, in detail (including his wall-punching episode), his prophecy theory and his theory about his power, complete with tunnel analogy and all. Along with those things, he told her of Tonks' request to join the D.A., the missing book McGonagall wanted him to find, and his intention to grill Dumbledore for information as soon as possible.

"I'm worried we don't have much time...mmm..." Harry suddenly had the urge and laced his fingers through his hair roughly, squeezing his eyes shut so he could focus on his priorities—his goals—his position in the world—what he needed to get done. Defend himself, prepare himself, help his friends, protect his loved ones...god it was a weight. He massaged his scalp, trying to ease the tension; trying to make a straight line in his mind and connect the dots from one task to the next; a checklist.

He stopped talking and hadn't realized he'd been silent for a little while. Next things he felt were Angelina's cool fingers in his hair, touching his own fingers and helping him with his massage. She whispered, in the tone of voice he was familiar with and had come to expect from her: "We'll tell everyone tonight, and we'll make them listen. We'll start tonight, and we won't stop until you're satisfied. I'll help you—you don't have to go through this alone. You're not alone, you know. When he comes...we'll all be right here with you."

He nodded, his eyes shut; his head resting on her stomach. Her voice; her words; were a comfort to him. He realized he would always be glad he went into the Room of Requirement with her and the twins that night...

"Harry, if Dumbledore won't give you the answers you want, I'll be right there to help you find them yourself. Whatever that prophecy says—"

"Shhh..." Harry lifted his head and rose up to capture her lips with his, suddenly overcome with desire for her. He was hard as a rock, feeling more for her now than he could ever remember feeling. She moaned as he took her into his arms possessively and kissed her deeply. His tongue dove into her warm, inviting mouth and he backed her up to his bed. They didn't lock the door but he couldn't have

cared less as he fell on top of her and squeezed and tugged and melted into her body. His breath came out in short, steamy bursts as he concentrated on undressing her. The smell of her from earlier was still lingering when she was naked and he buried his face in her neck hungrily to take as much of it in as possible.

Pausing only to allow her to pull his shirt over his head, he immediately went for her supple breasts, cupping one in his hand and taking the other in his mouth. Harry teased her there for several minutes, loving the sounds she made; they egged him on as she fought to get his jeans unzipped. They rolled around in bed kissing and stroking each other. Just before he entered her, he gazed into her eyes and whispered hoarsely that he loved her. "I love you too..."

"No, Angelina..." he shook his head, balancing himself on his forearms, breathing on her. "Tell me you'll stay with me...please...I don't know what I would do now if something happened to you...promise..."

She leaned up and kissed him passionately; his hard member quivered and yearned to be inside her but he held back until he heard the words.

"I promise, Harry."

Harry thrust hard and quick—she whimpered with pleasure and all was lost except how good she felt inside.

Chapter 41: The Plan is the Thing

A chilly nightfall had settled over the city of Varna.

Along the coast, bright lights from the many homes and large resorts nestled in the hills of the bay lit the dark waters of the Black Sea in warm shades. The shore's pristine sand gleamed in the light as the waxing moon sat in a sky filled with thousands of stars; gray clouds moved dreamlike over its surface every now and again. There was a fine, damp mist moving along the land and the water slowly.

While the muggles living or vacationing in Varna Bay settled themselves inside for the night's chill, far out in the sea where the warm lights of the city were but specs in the distance, a large black ship sat swaying heavily in the wind that rippled the waters.

This ship cannot be seen from any point on the shore, nor can it be seen by any other vessel sailing the Black Sea at any time. This wasn't simply because of the overcast night, but because it is an enchanted ship that at the time of its creation had powerful spells placed on it to hide it from the naked eye. None but the mer-people living beneath the sea's black surface can spot it passing them by, and that is for a very specific reason. It is UnPlottable, and it has been for nigh a hundred years as ordained by the Bulgarian Minister for Magic back then.

The very first crewmen to step foot on her had christened her the Anka, after the wife of the Minister, who sailed on her maiden voyage to King Iordan's territory and offered her husband's words of truce to the violent Mer-King. The Minister's wife was tall and stunningly beautiful with blonde hair that looked like spun silk; many suspected she had Veela in her family's bloodline. It was told and retold over the years that the Mer-King had been uncharacteristically charmed by her. She had gone down into the depths, allowing his people to carry her into the sea to meet with him. She did him a courtesy by speaking mermish and offered him gifts as they talked at length about the truce her husband offered.

The mer-people of the Black Sea had been known then as brutally territorial and often unpredictably hostile towards both wizards and muggles. Unwarranted attacks were not uncommon. The pervasive grapple for control of the waters (chiefly the safe passage of muggle and wizard ships without fear of attack) had been going on for years up until this point. Many praised Minister Radomir for his wisdom in sending the beautiful Anka to negotiate the truce, while others criticized him for risking her life.

She stayed below the surface for hours, worrying her husband and the Ministry officials who accompanied her on the voyage. When she finally emerged, she was standing on the Mer-King's shoulders, and he made sure she set foot aboard the ship safely before nodding his solemn agreement with Minister Radomir's terms to the officials standing dumbfounded on deck. Whenever she was asked how her time had been below the sea with the mer-people and powerful, intimidating King Iordan, Anka would always say the same thing: "I was happy to serve my husband, and I never once feared for my life."

Now the Anka is considerably older and worn from generations of use patrolling the King's territory night and day for a century. Tonight a crewman of the ship for nearly ten of those hundred, now First Mate, stood smoking his pipe and squinting at the dark waters deep in thought. Luka Varga was a wizard of average talent who found that the best life for someone like him was a simple one. He loved being out at sea, and he didn't need to have wealth or extraordinary power to live comfortably. At a muscular six feet, seven inches with jet black hair and handsome, chiseled features, he had known his own limits and strengths at an early age. He liked muggles—his Uncle Ivan had married one—he liked women, fire whiskey, and smoking his pipe on a night like tonight. He liked books, and he liked to take a nap after a large meal. He'd been born in Zagreb, Croatia just before the war to a middle class witch and wizard who struggled to put him through school at Dumstrang. He didn't like school much, but he finished and left home as soon as possible to make his own way in the world. He had done just that and, most importantly, on his own terms.

He sighed idly as the smoke from his pipe came through his nostrils in wispy coils and was swept away by the icy breeze.

Sometimes, when he was out here on watch, one or two mermaids would surface and stare at him. Since mermish sounds like a thousand nails on a very large chalkboard above water, none of them would ever speak, but he had been treated on several occasions over the years to some very nice little shows. Mermaids in this region had smooth, very dark blue skin and long black hair. Their eyes reflected the moonlight even when there was no moon, and their lips were full and succulent. Sometimes he had fantasies about them, but they always frustrated him because he could never get past the whole ‘over-sized fin where legs should be’ thing. But those bosoms...those shining, slippery-wet bosoms always got him...

It was unusually quiet tonight, though. So far, an hour and a half into his shift, none of them had popped up to say hello. He thought he knew why, and he grunted to himself wisely as he took another drag off his pipe. They had a guest aboard the Anka tonight. A famous one—one that Luka had recognized instantly when he was approached while they were loading up previsions at the hidden dock. Luka smiled at the moon’s reflection on the swaying surface of the water. Both he and Aleksander Borev, the ship’s captain, had been thrilled beyond belief to finally meet such a prominent and respected wizard. Thrilled, but also puzzled. Albus Dumbledore had told them a remarkable story about his intention to speak with the Mer-King.

It was highly unusual...but he was Albus Dumbledore! Who wouldn’t jump at the chance to be of some assistance to him? It was pretty important, Luka understood; especially if what the elder wizard told them was true.

Anyway, Luka suspected the mer-people sensed Dumbledore’s presence aboard the ship. The Anka crew had been accepted by the mer-people; they were all very used to each other and one might even say they were on friendly terms by now since the truce had been put into effect. But King Iordan was wary of others encroaching upon their arrangement, and Luka guessed that below the surface his people were probably keeping watch. No doubt the king knew who Albus Dumbledore was...no doubt he was suspicious of just what the elderly wizard wanted.

Luka heard noise from behind him just as a cluster of inky clouds passed over the moon, and he turned to squint into the darkness. There was some shuffling and what sounded like the dragging of rope across the wooden deck surface. He clamped his pipe between his teeth in the corner of his mouth and stood upright from his leaning position against the capstan. Frowning, Luka pulled his wand out of its beaten up holster and illuminated it. Shining the pale light off his wand tip over in the corner where he heard the noise, he watched as a jumble of extra rope someone had stored there came to life and rose up, uncoiling itself slowly.

Luka was the sort of wizard who remained calm in the face of danger; he liked to make absolutely certain what his options were in such situations--if one panics it's hard to do that. So he simply stood and watched as the rope gradually worked itself into several knots and coils until it resembled a human figure of sorts. He blew smoke out through his nostrils again and kept his wand raised as the human shape became still more defined within the mass of tangled rope. A few moments later a likeness of Albus Dumbledore was standing in front of him where a bundle of rope used to be, complete with pointed hat and half-moon spectacles all made out of knots of various size.

The eyes; tiny knots within the spectacle coils; moved uncertainly in his direction and then the Dumbledore figure smiled, bowing a little stiffly. "Ah..." said the wizard's voice to Luka quite clearly, as though the real Dumbledore were standing there instead. "I've finally managed it. Good evening to you, Mr. Varga. I hope I didn't startle you."

Luka puffed on his pipe, raising a thick black eyebrow at the rope-wizard. "No..." he said in his raspy Croatian accent, "but eh...why would you fashion yourself out of rope when you could just come up from below deck and talk to me in person?"

"Oh!" the Dumbledore copy chuckled softly. He raised a knotted finger and the smile grew wider. Even the eyebrows were present, and he raised them now at Luka apologetically. "Let me explain: my traveling companion suggested I try something I've been neglecting for a long time. I'm a bit rusty, I'm afraid. We've only been at it for a couple of hours, but I think I've got it. How do you find it?"

Luka shrugged, giving the figure a once-over with his wand tip. "It looks fine. Very sturdy...impressive."

"Thank you," said 'Dumbledore' trying out a few motor functions experimentally. "It will take some getting used to, but it is a preferred method of communication while I'm away from home. Letters can be intercepted, you see; floo networks are being watched, and the like."

Luka nodded and made a noise of agreement, smoking his pipe and studying the rope configuration walk stiffly to and fro across the deck. He had never had much use for such complex magic. It looked foreign, and he wasn't surprised to hear it was that exotic witch's idea. She and another one had boarded the ship with Dumbledore the day before, but she was the only one left with him now. The other one (who hadn't spoken a word the entire time he was there) had suddenly Disapparated several hours ago. It was fine by Luka; he didn't much like the man anyway. A person who never spoke probably had something to hide, and secrets almost always meant trouble. Though...Luka scoffed quietly as 'Dumbledore' continued moving about in front of him; they were in some trouble now, weren't they? The Ministry from Dumbledore's neck of the woods was looking for them.

His pipe was done. Replacing it with his wand between his teeth, he fished in his coat for more to fill it with as he watched the ropes practice walking and gesturing. Aleksander stumbled above deck just then, shoving his hat over his balding head and coughing tiredly. He glanced over at the jumble of ropes and yawned. "What the hell is that, eh?" he grunted.

Luka shrugged. "It's Dumbledore."

"No, you idiot, Dumbledore is below deck with that witch...probably having a private time with her, you know. Even he couldn't resist such a woman, as old as he is!" He laughed heartily and it melted into a coughing fit. Luka clapped him on the back. 'Dumbledore' turned and smiled at the men.

“...‘private time’? Interesting way of complimenting Miss Kasamatsu’s beauty, Captain.”

Captain Borev, or Alek as most of his crewmen got away with calling him, did a double take and lost his smile. He shuffled on his feet, taking his hat off and scratching at the bald spot on his head. “Uh...my apologies, Dumbledore. I didn’t realize...” Alek nudged Luka in his ribs hard as though it was the first mate’s fault he’d put his foot in his mouth.

“Not at all,” replied ‘Dumbledore’. He stood stone still for a moment, and then the bundle of ropes dropped suddenly into a lifeless heap on the deck. The men exchanged looks and shrugged. Alek walked over to the massive knot, kicked at it, and prodded it with his shabby wand.

“What the hell is happening on my ship lately?” he grumbled, though he was smiling. “I haven’t seen such strange magic since I was a boy...I’ve been out at sea too long...”

Luka shook his head, knowing that Alek didn’t mean that. He loved the sea more than he loved his own wife, whom he hadn’t seen in six years. Doubtful she was still his wife, but even more doubtful he would make port where she lived long enough to find out. Alek recoiled the rope with a flick of his wand and pushed it back into the corner where it had been originally. Spitting overboard into the water, he replaced his captain’s hat and grinned at Luka.

“Isn’t this something, Luka?” he boasted loudly. “Albus Dumbledore aboard the Anka! Wait until we make port in the South again, those idiots at the Rotting Fish will shit themselves!”

The Rotting Fish was a shady dive where most of the wizards sailing on the Black Sea for one reason or another went to drink and find easy women when they made port. They were always swapping stories; bragging about what exotic magical creature they were transporting this month or some other fantastical story to impress the other sailors and the women. Luka and Alek had been patrolling King Iordan’s territory for years, so they hardly ever had anything new to tell. A few times they tried making things up, but they were always

ridiculed for it until finally they just stopped and concentrated on getting laid on their looks alone. Luka was more successful in this department, of course. He was tall, strong, and handsome where Alek was shorter, brawnier, and older. He looked like he could be a girl's father rather than her lover. He managed, however, to secure a couple of witches that he saw steadily every time they stopped in, though one of them was now rumored to have been carried off by a vampire...Merlin only knew where she ended up...

"No one is supposed to know he's here, Alek..." explained Luka patiently, re-lighting his pipe. Sometimes he wondered why their places weren't swapped...it was true most of the crew members agreed that he should be captain and Alek First Mate. But, Alek had been aboard the Anka longer, and the former captain liked him a great deal; almost like a son. Besides that, Luka counted Alek as a very good friend. He knew that in time the captaincy could be his, the moment Alek decided to give it up. Retirement for that chap was a long way off, however, and for now Luka was content where he was.

As Luka was taking a drag from his pipe, the real Dumbledore appeared above deck, nodding again in greeting to the men. He moved much easier in his own skin, and looked every bit as legendary and revered as Luka had always heard him to be growing up. He fought the urge to whistle in awe. It was almost like passing by a stunningly beautiful woman. One simply did not want to turn his eyes away from the sight of such a man—he was a wizard of renown and importance. Here he was, though, rubbing elbows with poor, simple sailors like Luka and Alek.

"Indeed you are right, Mr. Varga. No one is supposed to know I'm here. Though, it seems..." he sighed tiredly and offered a faint smile, "Cornelius has thought much farther ahead than I anticipated. Clever of him to enlist your Ministry's help in capturing me--and quite troubling. His paranoia about my intentions has reached an alarming level."

Luka blinked thoughtfully and Alek nodded, though he probably didn't really know what Dumbledore was talking about. "Don't worry, sir," the First Mate offered, folding his arms and hunkering down into his coat. "This ship is UnPlottable and we're our own bosses."

"That's right," Alek added firmly, cottoning on. "We don't answer to anyone. We decide who boards the Anka and who doesn't. What do they know, these Ministry slums, eh? To us, you're good, Dumbledore. Like family. Like my own papa, okay?"

"Most obliged, gentlemen. So!" Dumbledore clapped his hands once cheerfully and peered out at the sea over his half moon spectacles. "Any sign of the good king?"

"None," Luka answered. "I've been on watch for almost two hours now and nothing. It's a little too quiet out there."

"Ah, you're right. King Iordan, as I suspected, is loath to meet me again. But it is important that I speak with him...how can we tempt him I wonder?"

"Don't worry, Dumbledore," Alek spoke up, coughing a little. "We'll find him. I mean, he hasn't surfaced in nearly sixty years, but nothing's impossible, you know? If he knows you're the one looking for him, maybe he'll think 'Hey, why not? Dumbledore's a good guy!'"

Amused, the elder wizard nodded. "I trust you, Captain. Please remember, however, that I am rather short of time. Minerva's letter said forty-eight hours, and I intend to be gone in exactly that. I had rather hoped to make my appeal to the king in person, but if I must speak with him as a bundle of rope, or a tangle of seaweed, then so be it."

Harry must've been exhausted.

Almost childlike, he curled up next to Angelina and wrapped his arms around her as though he was clutching his favorite pillow. He fell asleep almost instantly. She watched his face relax into soft obliviousness as his breathing melted into a faint, steady rhythm. A twitch of his eyelids was all she would get for a while as they lay there. She had no problem with that...she watched him sleeping...wondering...what was going on in that troubled mind of his? Was he dreaming of the Department of Mysteries again...of Voldemort...of death and danger...?

Finally she turned to stare up at the ceiling of his canopy; tired but not sleepy. Angelina could hear the laughter and talk from the common room below. She was torn between the happiness she felt at finally having the Quidditch season over and the worry she was experiencing for Harry. She had thought this to herself a few times already but repeating it in her mind now didn't make it any less true: he was transforming. Sometimes the differences were subtle and sometimes they were not; there was a storm of some kind brewing inside of him...one of magnitude, one of reflection and turmoil...one of significance.

After a long while of contemplating the shifting, changing winds of fate Angelina turned to discover that Harry's eyes were open.

He breathed in deep...let it out slowly. She watched him, briefly feeling a delicate thread connecting their thoughts, their concerns, their fears and their anticipations. When his breath touched her face and faded away, he got up abruptly, dressed, and ran both hands through his jet black hair. "Are you ready?"

"Uh-huh. You...?"

Harry nodded. "Let's go."

The Room of Requirement was warm, crowded, and...smoky? Yes, Angelina saw as she and Harry stepped inside--someone was actually smoking.

The somewhat sweet, clove-like smell of the cigarette one usually found adult wizards puffing on in dodgy pubs wafted over to her and she inhaled. She vaguely remembered her grandfather smoking those. They were bewitched to last; you could go on smoking a single cigarette for days and days. The smoking kid was lanky and dark-haired; she'd never seen him at their meetings before, but his face did look familiar. She frowned at him and nudged Harry with an elbow as they stood in the back. Harry had been gazing around the room with a slightly astonished expression on his young face. He hadn't yet noticed the kid in the corner smoking nonchalantly.

Upon studying him, Angelina's boyfriend made a faint noise of interest and then turned to finish his observation of the room.

It was full of students; there were loads more of them in here tonight than at any other DA meeting ever. Angelina was impressed. The large space they used to practice dueling was now occupied by kids sitting cross-legged talking amongst themselves with a mixture of anticipation and uncertainty. This was no assembly in the Great Hall, after all. This was a secret meeting—secret meetings were exciting, weren't they? Most of them probably figured that if it involved Harry Potter it was not to be missed. It was worth the risk being here tonight, they all seemed to be whispering to themselves as Angelina and Harry stood there watching them, if Harry Potter had something to say.

There were a dozen or more kids standing against the walls as well. Only the very front of the room had space—it seemed they'd all kept clear of that area to allow their speaker (Harry) to address them.

Cho Chang and her friends sat up front (minus Marietta of course—she was still in the hospital wing). Cho kept turning her head every now and then to check to see who was coming in next. Upon sight of Angelina and Harry she gave a tight little smile and turned around quickly. Neville was hanging against a wall with Seamus and Lee Jordan. He looked both solemn and keyed up somehow, if that were possible to discern—he just looked different, in other words. Angelina watched him, remembering what Harry told her about t Mad Eye Moody recruiting the stuttering boy to train with him. It was puzzling to her, but looking at him now...it made her extremely curious about what might've brought Moody to make such a decision. Also...she felt a small pang of jealousy. She would've given her left arm to train with such a legendary dark wizard catcher...

Katie and Alicia waved to her from their sitting position in a small circle made up of themselves, Lavender Brown, Susan Bones, and Pavarti and Padma Patil. Zacharias Smith and Roger Davies were getting chummy in a corner--Zach was explaining to Roger (a newcomer tonight) how the DA worked and what it was about. Roger looked dubious. Luna Lovegood took a seat next to Cho and began speaking breezily, not noticing that Cho was looking in another direction and scarcely paying attention.

Sitting almost in the center of the crowd were Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Dean. Ron was talking with Dean excitedly, presumably still soaring from his spectacular show at the Quidditch match. His face was flushed from the slight heat in the room, but his grin was wide and his eyes were shining. The same kind of expressions were echoed all around them; the same kind of eager chatter—it became hushed and sent chills down Angelina's back when all eyes suddenly noticed her and Harry standing there.

Seamus grinned at them. "The man himself! Hey Harry, how d'ya like the turnout?"

Harry's eyes swept the entire room once more and he offered a faint frown. He was nervous—Angelina could tell. "How did so many people find out?"

"They all volunteered mate," shrugged Ron. "We hardly had to lift a finger. Apparently our little operation is pretty popular, eh? Least it is among your adoring fans."

"Don't worry," Hermione offered quickly, seeing the look on Harry's face. "We all swore them to secrecy and they all signed our 'special' parchment when they came in." She offered him an earnest smile. It seemed she was attempting to make amends for dragging her feet earlier. It was working...a little.

Harry sighed and turned away from the crowd to look at Angelina. She smiled encouragingly at him. "Go on..."

With the slightest squeeze of his fingers she reconfirmed her promise to stand by him. Without another word Harry turned and snaked his way through clumps of sitting students, nodding in greeting to those who called out to him as he went by. Angelina backed up and found herself a spot against the wall next to an unfamiliar-looking girl wearing Gryffindor robes. The girl was tall and thin, with straight brown hair that stopped at her shoulders. She looked no more than Angelina's age in the face, but her eyes held a much more adult expression in them. Angelina glanced at her again as she settled herself against the wall. The girl returned her look, smiling a little and inclining her head in greeting. "Hello, Angelina..." she whispered.

"Do I know you?" Angelina whispered back uncertainly. Maybe she did look a little familiar...

"Yes, you do. But now isn't the time to explain it...Harry's on." Her hair did a funny thing under the light just then—it flickered almost crimson for a split second, but Angelina thought maybe it was just her eyes still being tired.

When he reached the front of the room, Harry took his wand out of his back pocket and began tapping it slowly against his thigh. The lingering conversations died away finally as he stood there, and when it was completely silent in the room the leader of Dumbledore's Army cleared his throat.

"Uh...okay then. I trust all of you pretty much know why you're here," he began earnestly, gesticulating with his wand and free hand. "Hopefully, you're here not only because you want to be, but because you understand exactly what you're getting into."

He paused, searching among their faces for agreement or puzzlement or regret. Angelina did the same, looking around her at the sides of people's heads to read their expressions. She felt satisfied with what she saw—Harry had their complete attention.

He continued after a moment.

"I tried, uh...thinking up a way to spin this; a way to tell you what's happening without shocking you." He paused; looking within himself for the words. "But I realized...the best way is to just say it. I want you to get upset. I want you angry and rowed up—I want you shocked. I know a lot of you hear all sorts of rumors about me; I know you've probably read the stories in the Prophet calling me a liar, calling me an opportunist or an egomaniac or whatever..."

He found her eyes and she nodded firmly for him to keep it up. Swallowing, he did go on; some of his hair fell into his face and it made him look quite boyish for a second before he got it out of the way with a shake of his head.

“...and if you think any of that is true; if you’re only here to have a laugh at Harry Potter the nutter, then you may as well just leave right now.”

No one budged. That wasn’t going to be enough to get them to abandon this—whatever it was that was happening. Harry seemed to understand that, but he looked satisfied all the same.

“All right I’ve asked you here for two reasons. One...” he took a breath; steeling himself, “...Voldemort has returned to his physical body and is organizing a bunch of his Death Eaters as we speak for an attack--” a collective gasp steamrolled its way around the room. Harry had to raise his voice as he continued: “--and two: the place he’s going to attack first is Hogwarts.”

He let them all get there various reactions out of their systems for a minute; Angelina watched him stand there defiantly waiting for someone to call him a liar. Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, Seamus and Dean all exchanged looks. They hadn’t heard a word about Harry’s experience in the showers that morning yet. Hermione and Ginny looked behind them at Angelina as well, but she merely nodded her head slightly to indicate that it was indeed the truth. Finally, as the talk was dying down again and people had recovered from hearing Voldemort’s name aloud, someone raised his hand. It was another kid Angelina had never seen at a single other meeting. That wouldn’t have bothered her, either, but that she saw his robes were Slytherin. He was very tall; leaning against the wall across the room from the smoking boy, and he wore glasses. His expression wasn’t skeptical per se, but definitely inquisitive. Harry took in his Slytherin robes and instinctive distrust flashed across his face for an instant. He recovered and indicated with a short nod for the other boy to ask his question.

“How do you know all of this, Potter?” Angelina could tell by his manner that he was a little older than a lot of them. Probably a seventh year. His tone was just as solid and straight-forward as his features. It was neither accusatory nor derogatory; it was as frank as frank could be, but his robes made Harry’s brow furrow again visibly.

“That’s a little harder to explain.”

"Well why don't you try us?" the Slytherin boy with glasses and blondish-brown hair asked without hesitation. Harry stared at him. The entire room seemed to be thinking the same exact thing. Ron and the others were paying close attention too.

Harry leveled with them. "Okay...there are kids in this school whose families are working for Voldemort. Death Eaters, basically. I overhead a parent talking to his son, who's training to become a Death Eater right now." It wasn't exactly a lie—but then it wasn't exactly the truth either. Angelina understood his decision to say it that way, though. "Voldemort's looking to take advantage of the fact that Dumbledore is on the run."

There were quite a few exchanged looks, and Harry made a noise of frustration. He knew if they could barely grasp this theory, telling them exactly why Voldemort wanted to get into Hogwarts (to lay a trap for Harry) would do little to improve their mindset.

"Look—how many of you saw in the papers about that mass breakout at Azkaban? Those were all Death Eaters. The Ministry still can't find them."

"That doesn't prove You-Know-Who is back," someone said. It was Demelza Robbins, a fifth year in Gryffindor. "It was that Sirius Black that helped them, I heard. The Ministry can't find him, either."

Angelina, along with Ron, Ginny, and Hermione, immediately checked Harry's expression. His jaw was clenched very tightly, and he looked at Demelza Robbins as though he would love nothing more than to shout at her: "Sirius Black is not a murderer—he's innocent and he'd die before he'd join with Voldemort!" Instead, he swallowed calmly and nodded at her, as though he understood where she was coming from.

"I know why you would think that. But...regardless if...if Sirius Black helped them break out or not--" his jaw clenched again, but he kept his cool, "--the fact still remains that a dozen of them broke out of there for a reason. They aren't sunning themselves on a beach

somewhere—they've regrouped. Hogwarts is vulnerable. Dumbledore's been driven off. People have died, disappeared, and..."

Angelina winced a bit when he began to pace. He couldn't help himself. Several of his audience began to squirm from hearing Voldemort's name repeated so heedlessly, but Harry ignored their reactions and continued.

"Last year..." he stopped pacing and looked at something in the floor; something only he could see, "...Cedric Diggory was murdered. The man we all thought was Professor Moody turned out to be one of Voldemort's most loyal Death Eaters. The only reason this isn't common knowledge is because Fudge let him get sucked dry by a Dementor. Cedric was just...in the wrong place at the wrong time...and it was because of me. It was..." he swallowed thickly. "...it was my fault."

Angelina's mouth fell open slightly; she couldn't help it. The room was so silent and still one could hear a pin drop. Harry stood there and didn't take back what he said or look to see how his friends reacted to it. She wondered why he had admitted such a thing—when those close to him all knew it couldn't possibly be true. Does he feel he needs to give these kids something in return for their support for the D.A.? she thought to herself. Does he feel by admitting something like that he can earn their trust more successfully? There wasn't a way to tell right then—she would make sure to ask him point blank later. And probably admonish him for it.

Someone sniffed; it was Cho. Luna put an arm around her shoulders. Cho looked surprised, but she accepted the gesture.

"I read that...in the interview you gave to that Skeeter woman. It's all true then?" Hannah Abbot asked quietly.

Harry nodded, still staring at the floor. "Yeah, it's true. But I won't let it happen again. Vold--" Hannah winced. "...You-Know-Who...is out there, waiting." He looked up at the sea of staring faces again. "If we're going to keep him out of here, we'll have to do it together. I can't do it by myself. I need your help."

"Okay—say we take your word that You-Know-Who is really back and getting ready to strike; what about the school staff? Don't they know this? Isn't Hogwarts supposed to be warded up the arse in case something happens?" Another D.A. newcomer asked; she was also a Slytherin. Daphne Greengrass; she could've been Harry's twin. She had pale skin, long jet black hair, and vibrant green eyes. Her expression was somewhat more skeptical than her tall housemate's but she merely waited for Harry to answer her. Angelina didn't fancy her much, but her presence in this room tonight would give her brownie points if she turned out to be serious about getting involved.

"If I know McGonagall, most of them are aware there's a threat by now," answered Harry.

"Potter's right..." said the girl standing next to Angelina. She was frowning now; she stood with her arms crossed.

"Is that...?" Ron muttered, squinting at the girl with a baffled expression. Hermione gave him a sharp jab in the ribs with her elbow as suddenly all eyes were on the girl who'd spoken. She merely settled herself comfortably under the curious gaze of every single other person in the room. Harry looked pleased. Seeing his face made Angelina remember what he'd mentioned to her earlier about Professor Tonks asking to join the D.A. that afternoon. She remembered finding out in her Defense Against the Dark Arts class that Tonks was a Metamorphmagus. So this must've been one of her disguises.

"Professor Tonks?" whispered Angelina, now instantly recognizing the professor's cool features underneath the girlish hair. They were smoother and younger-looking, but they did belong to the usually suit-clad D.A.D.A. teacher.

"Shh...it's Tulip in here, Angelina, all right?" she whispered back. Tonks (a.k.a. "Tulip") stood upright from her leaning position, ignoring the whispering that broke out. Angelina thought she heard a Hufflepuff boy ask his friend 'who the bloody hell is that?'

"I heard some of them talking before I came up here. McGonagall called a staff meeting tonight. They have good reason to believe an

attack is possible.” Questions flew at her at once, but she didn’t open her mouth until everyone settled down again. “Hey, lookit, I’m just telling you what I heard. There is definitely something funny going on around here—I just think we should hear Potter out, is all...”

She gave Harry a look that told him to just go with it.

He began to speak, but was interrupted by Zach Smith. “Wait--so if they do know what’s going on, why wasn’t there an assembly or something? Why didn’t McGonagall make an announcement?”

Scattered murmuring of agreement broke out.

Tonks smiled. “Well, all right, I did hear that Professor Tonks woman say something else: ‘it’s a delicate situation’ or such like that. The Ministry and the administration here at Hogwarts are in the middle of a cold war, she said. Fudge just sticks his thumbs in his ears whenever anyone mentions You-Know-Who. You all heard what happened to Dumbledore; and I’ll bet my last Knut McGonagall isn’t gonna let that happen to her. Professor Sprout said McGonagall’s maybe the last person Fudge still trusts enough to make Headmistress who still has us kids’ best interests in mind.”

“So those of us who aren’t in this room will go on ignorant of what’s really happening until it’s too late, is that it?” Daphne said flatly.

Tonks looked at her intensely for a moment before answering. “Most of ‘us’ who aren’t in this room would do the same as Fudge and turn a blind eye any way, Greenie.”

The Slytherin girl narrowed her eyes at Tonks. “What did you just call me? Who are you anyway? I don’t remember ever speaking to you before...”

“It’s Tulip.” Tonks responded simply. “And you wouldn’t have talked to me before because I’m a Gryffindor and I wasn’t exactly born with a silver spoon, was I?” Daphne’s cheeks went as red as Tonks’ usual hair color and she crossed her arms huffily. “Right,” Tonks went on, “so I’m guessing to avoid news of the administration’s position on this

getting back to the Ministry, the staff is gonna prepare the castle in secret-like. That's how I'd do it, anyway...wait and watch."

"Which is exactly what we're going to do," Harry spoke up, causing the sea of heads to turn again towards him again. "Only they don't really want us to because they're too afraid of the consequences. McGonagall thinks we're too young to deal with this. I say Voldemort and his followers couldn't care less how old any of us are. If we're in their way, they'll kill us. We're getting organized—we're going to train, and we're going to be ready to fight. Every single one of you will have a role to play."

"Well...what about our exams?" someone, Hufflepuff Ernie MacMillan, asked quietly. He had a look on his round face that suggested he'd rather be off in his room buried under a mountain of homework than here talking about possible wand-to-wand combat with a bunch of crazed escaped prisoners. Harry shrugged at him.

"If you'd rather be studying, you should go ahead. Just don't say anything about what we're doing to anyone; otherwise you'll end yourself up with a giant zit for a face like Marietta Edgecombe." Several people winced. Ernie lowered his hand and clamped his mouth shut. Harry added: "Anyway—we'll make time while we're training to study for stuff. Right, Hermione?"

Eyeballs became glued to Hermione. Ron suppressed a snort. After a beat in which the gears in the young woman's head turned quickly, she nodded somewhat begrudgingly. "Er--sure we can arrange that..." She fixed Harry with an 'I'm going to kill you...' look. He shrugged at her as if to say 'you asked for it.'

Ernie smiled now, seeming to decide this was a good idea—an eager look flickered across his face. "Oh, well in that case I think we should organize a tutoring corner, yes? I've studied for nearly five hours every night on every subject, and I can--"

"All right, all right; we get the point, ya tosspot..." Ron muttered, glancing apprehensively at Hermione, who had a competitive gleam in her eyes.

Harry took over again.

"We can go over all that later, MacMillan. First thing we're going to do is assign everybody a job. This is going to make our work much better; you know, more efficient. If everybody knows exactly what their role is once the time comes, we'll be more effective. Does everybody agree with that?"

The lanky kid who'd been smoking the sweet-smelling cigarette raised his hand. The cigarette was unfinished, tucked behind his ear, holding his shoulder-length black hair in place. "When the time comes," Potter. What does that mean exactly?" Though he asked the question, Angelina could see he knew exactly what that meant. There was something shining in his eyes...he looked excited. Wickedly so. Harry observed him for a long moment, taking him in more thoroughly than he had when Angelina first pointed him out. There was something in his face that was strongly reminiscent of Fred and George, on a darker scale.

"It means...I'm going to teach you all how to fight. And when they come...you'll either defend yourself...or you could die."

Silence. Angelina let it wash over her. She had goose bumps, despite the slight warmth in the room.

"Merlin..." someone whispered. "Are we really talking about fighting off Death Eaters...and possibly You-Know-Who? This lot?"

"Yeah that's right, this lot," said Harry purposefully. "That's exactly what we're talking about. If you need to take a minute and let that sink in, go ahead."

Harry stood before them exuding an indescribably powerful determination...it seemed to reach out to everyone in the room...seemed to creep to the very back and around again. It wasn't just because she loved him. She wasn't so blindly enamored. No...Harry Potter had a way with people.

Here, in this room, he had an affect on them all. He was a born leader; this was as obvious as the scar on his forehead. His peers—

some already having been members of the D.A. since the beginning, and the rest all newcomers—now looked on him with the most extraordinary something in their faces. Angelina tried different words in her head to find ones that sounded right—trust. Respect. Willingness. No doubt some of them were scared. No doubt even more had no idea what they were really getting into. And no doubt...the full weight of what he'd told them hadn't hit them yet. But the seed had been planted. And excitement was brewing. What a strange thing; that mingled in with all the palpable fear and doubt in this room, exhilaration was filling the warm air as well. Most looked as if they had visions swimming behind their eyes of gruesome face-to-face battles with anonymous Death Eaters...those that inspired terror and brought chaos and death wherever they went were now being thought of by a group of teenagers as targets. It was because of Harry...she knew it.

"Before I go on any further...does anyone have any more questions about why we're here? Anybody still think I'm a liar? If you do..." he pointed his wand towards the back of the room, where Angelina and Tonks were standing near the door. "The exit is right back there."

He watched the room for a moment as though expecting several of them to get up and leave, but no one did.

"...like I said, everyone's going to have a job to do. Dean?" He gestured for Dean to take over. The other boy stood up from the floor next to Ginny and walked forward to the front. He addressed their audience, clearing his throat and scratching his head absently.

"Right—okay so basically it's like this..."

Dean's idea had been as such: they would impose what he called a "Strike System". It would consist of three levels of defense—utilizing all the manpower they would have in order to keep fighting for as long as they could until reinforcements arrived. This would be tricky; not all of them were on the same level magically, but Harry was confident that with each other's support they could achieve the basic objective of keeping the enemy out.

"First Strike," Dean told them, getting comfortable at the front, "will be a flying squad led by Harry. Now, this is operating on the assumption that they won't expect us to fly in first—they'll be looking at the ground and figure if we come we'll be charging straight at them or else off hiding somewhere 'cause we're dumb kids, right?"

Next there was Second Strike, which would be lead by Neville. Upon hearing this—and then hearing what Second Strike was—a lot of people reacted with skepticism. Neville was quiet while Dean explained. Second Strike would be the ground attack. They would 'charge' from all sides and do combat with Voldemort's Death Eaters face-to-face. Harry had explained the night before that Neville had way more tricks up his sleeve than people were willing to believe. He did the same now. He would have gone on, but Neville spoke up.

"Look I know what you're all thinking." He sighed, closing his eyes to gather a bit of nerve before continuing. "But the truth is I don't really care what any of you think you know about me. Anyone who's brave enough to go in with me is welcome on my team."

There were a number of people who still looked skeptical, but no one spoke. They moved on. Colin Creevey's hand shot up like a rocket before Dean could open his mouth. He was grinning broadly, sitting next to his brother Dennis. Unfortunately they were right in front of the smoking boy, and looked rather pale, but still it seemed they were about to burst with excitement. Harry sighed. "Colin—what is it?"

"I know what's next! Dennis and I can do that—and we've got friends who can help!"

"How do you know what's next" Ron asked, turning to stare at the hyper pair of them. "Were you little scamps eavesdropping last night? I guess now we know how the word about tonight got spread so fast, Harry..."

Colin turned red but his resolve did not falter. "Harry, we can do it. Right, Dennis?"

Dennis nodded enthusiastically. Even though Colin was a Fourth Year and Dennis a Second, they were both so small they looked like

they'd just stepped off the scarlet steam engine for the first time that year. Harry frowned at them. It was true they had puzzled last night over who might be best for this next role—they knew they would probably need every capable older student to fight with them. Who, then, would be in charge of sounding the alarm, getting the smaller kids out of harm's way, and running messages back and forth should things get crazy? He thought...if Ron's hunch was correct, then Colin and Dennis were responsible for tonight's overwhelming attendance. This meant that, essentially, they had told a lot of people in a short amount of time and they did it under everyone's noses. There was something to be said for that.

Colin and Dennis sat there looking at Harry beseechingly, and though his first instinct was to say no (a very McGonagall-like instinct, but it was there), he slowly gave in.

"All right...we'll give you a shot."

"Yes!" shouted the boys, giving each other high fives. Ron shook his head at them. Dean went over the Strike System again, adding that Hermione would be in charge of getting everyone organized and that she would need help if anyone wanted to volunteer. Ernie MacMillan was the first to raise his hand for that one. Hermione squinted at him forbiddingly but said nothing.

"All right, everyone—first order of business is figuring out who's going to do what." Hermione announced. "We'll call for each team separately, and if you want on that team, you'll simply raise your hand."

"But--" Harry added, "--you need to think long and hard before you put your hand up. If we can get everyone sorted just once without a bunch of swapping around, it'll make things a lot easier. You volunteer for a job, that's your job—you're doing it; no excuses."

Hermione frowned at him with a shadow of disapproval at his tough stance, but didn't attempt to contradict him. "First Strike team volunteers? You'll need to be able to maneuver pretty well on a broom, and decent coordination for spell-casting while you're airborne is also a plus. Quidditch players would be good here, obviously."

Harry watched. Ron raised his hand first, followed by Angelina and Dean; then came Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet. Hermione wrote these names down quickly--Cho's hand rose. Next Andrew Kirk, Jack Sloper...all the obvious people, really.

Then something really good happened—Demelza Robbins raised her hand, a brave frown settled across her face. Hermione wrote her name down. Demelza was followed by Roger Davies and that tall Slytherin boy with the glasses. He told Hermione his name was Noah Clarke. Zacharias Smith put his hand up as well. As did several other people, all of them were newcomers that Harry barely spoke to on a regular basis. Hermione wrote all of these names down and gave Harry a satisfied smile.

“All right—next is Neville’s Second Strike team. Here I would suggest you be quick on your feet with really strong defensive instincts—you know, can you counteract a jinx easily, or will you end up cursed before you even know what happened? Also, you ought to understand you’ll likely be fighting face-to-face with real Death Eaters...and...well you may be seriously injured.”

Here Ginny and Parvarti were the first to raise their hands. Harry felt impressed by Parvarti. She didn’t look hesitant about this decision at all; her expression was as resolute as Ginny’s. Lee Jordan and Luna Lovegood had their hands up. Tonks raised hers and smirked when Daphne Greengrass’ palm shot into the air, followed by Michael Corner, Susan Bones, Hannah Abbot (to Harry’s surprise), and Hermione raised her own hand as well. In addition, a few more newcomers raised their hands for Neville’s team. The boy looked pleased, and also a little apprehensive. Harry knew he was nervous about being a leader. He can handle it...he thought to himself; or rather prayed...

There were still quite a few people who hadn’t volunteered for anything; they all looked like they had taken Harry’s command to think long and hard very seriously. Harry could count the number of them who looked like they were holding out for the job of assisting Hermione with the organizational duties on one hand—that still left about a dozen people unassigned. The lanky, long-haired, smoking

boy cleared his throat just as Dean was about to call for volunteers for Colin and Dennis' little squad.

"You're missing somethin', aren't ya?" he drawled, still grinning that wicked grin Harry had glimpsed earlier.

"What are we forgetting?"

The smoking boy scratched his chin. "Well...I thought I heard y'say three strikes? I counted only two in all that." His cocksure attitude was laced with a strong undercurrent of mischievousness that Harry didn't quite know how to react to at first.

"What are you talking about, man?" Dean asked, sounding a bit annoyed. "I just went over everything, didn't I? Were you even paying attention--?"

"Sure I was. Sounded like these underclassmen are gonna be runnin' messages around and roundin' up the other kids for us; that's not what I'd call a strike." He grinned wider, scoffing in a politely amused way and shaking his head. "Tha's just busy work, innit? I mean, no offense to them or anythin'. Then Granger's got her organizin' and okay that's swell—we gotta have order, lest we all go mad with the excitement of knocking off a few Death Eaters." He had everyone's complete attention, now. He stood up from his leaning position against the wall and stepped forward a little, towering over Colin and Dennis. Angelina and Tonks observed him with matching looks—both had eyes fixed and focused with intrigue. Harry stared at him as well; he was having trouble figuring out if this guy was up to something or not. "You'll be flyin' in on your brooms...Longbottom's got his suicide squad...all swell, mate. But we need somethin' else; just a little somethin' extra."

"Something 'extra'--like what?" Angelina asked very quietly. He turned to catch her gaze. His eyes flashed—they were dark but for a split second they came alive with enthusiasm. It seemed he had been waiting for someone to ask him that question the whole time. She obliged him. "Go on...we're all listening."

"All right, if you want to know...while you lot have all been buyin' up that Weasley joke rubbish I've been developing some real sparks, yeah?"

"My brothers' products aren't rubbish--what are you, some sort of cracked up pyro or something?" Ron scoffed, frowning at the kid disdainfully.

The kid grinned yet again. "Maybe...doesn't matter. But those Death Eaters won't expect to be havin' their ears blown off by one of my beauties, I can assure you." He put his hands up in a false gesture of surrender when several people in the room started talking at him. He raised his voice over the din of the crowd. "That's all I'm sayin'. Anyone's got the right to disagree. I just think it's a shame to get all fussed up trying to protect this castle without some real ammunition, if you follow me."

Seamus raised his eyebrows. "That actually doesn't sound too bad a thing to me..."

"Yeah, right; you can't even get your wand off without setting something on fire, ya git." Ron joked.

"Belt up, Weasley." Seamus stood upright to address Harry—and the crowd. "I mean I think he's right. If you're serious about us defendin' ourselves Harry, maybe we should listen to what he has to say."

Harry eyed Seamus and folded his arms. He addressed the lanky kid again. "I am listening—what did you say your name was?"

"I didn't. Name's Eddie Carmichael; Sixth year Ravenclaw at your service, mate." Eddie gave an elaborate bow. "Ready to be the captain of any doom squad we can scrape together, but I'd choose a more colorful way of keepin' the Boogie Men out if I were you."

"Doom Squad...I like that..." Seamus muttered, apparently warming up to this guy more and more.

Harry thought for a second. Everyone was simultaneously watching him and Eddie with clipped breath. Seamus looked very attracted to

the idea. Truthfully, so was Harry. Angelina shattered the tense silence, demanding: "Show us then."

Eddie turned his playfully wicked eyes on her once more, a dubious smile on his lips. "Come again, love?"

"You heard me, Carmichael." She returned the smile, gesturing to the others, who hung on their every word. "Show us these 'beauties' of yours, so we can judge for ourselves how much use they'll be before we go putting together a...Doom Squad, you called it?"

Harry stepped forward, hesitating between protesting such a display and the immense curiosity Angelina's demand had spurred in him. "Are you serious?" asked Eddie of Angelina.

She turned to Harry, who still stood with his arms crossed, eyeing the strange kid who seemed determined to cause controversy. "She's serious..." he answered after a beat, "so am I. What have you got?"

"Wait...maybe we should just..." Hermione spoke up, looking cautious. "...stick with Dean's idea?"

"Potter, you sure you want me to show you here...now...?" Eddie said, his voice taking on some kind of edge that made the hairs on the back of Angelina's neck stand up. He took another step forward.

"Why not?"

"A little crowded in here..." Eddie shrugged. "Might not be wise, is all."

"Is that because you don't really have anything to show for yourself?" Zacharias Smith piped up harshly. "You're a troublemaker, Carmichael. For all your talk, I'll bet you're only here to stir up a fuss, and it's not amusing anyone."

Eddie glared at him. "I don't need this lot around to cause trouble, Smith..." Harry caught the rather savage undertone in the boy's voice, but before he could comment on it, Eddie had reached into his pocket and retrieved three small objects. They were the size and shape of golf balls, though they were translucent—inside them Harry could

make out what looked like black smoke pierced by tiny flickers of shining light. Eddie maneuvered them around in his palm, lacing them between his fingers as he leaned against the wall nonchalantly again, now smirking at Zacharias.

“What are they?” Angelina asked as every neck craned to see. There was near-complete silence. The things circling around Carmichael’s palm gave Harry a dark wave of nostalgia. For a moment he could almost feel himself back in the so-called Hall of Prophecy; back in his dreams.

“They’re my pride and joy...” Carmichael joked. He loosened his palm and the three objects rose silently into the air to hover above his head. Everyone held their breath. Harry stood stone still, watching; his hand gripping his wand warily. If he hadn’t had his eyes trained on Eddie and those mysterious floating objects, he might’ve noticed that both Neville and Tonks had their wands at the ready as well.

“Step aside, Potter.” Harry narrowed his eyes forbiddingly, but Eddie was only half-smiling, nodding his head that it was okay (translated: safe) for Harry to step back. Harry took two very slow, deliberate steps to the side, where Eddie had a clear path now to the opposite wall. He moved his fingers – the orbs began to spin around lazily, and then he snapped his fingers sharply. One of the translucent balls filled with black smoke went racing towards the wall Harry had been standing in front of. Harry raised his wand, but Eddie hastily said “No, it’s all right, just watch...!” The ball hit the wall and shattered to dust. The wall caught fire.

A large, uneven pattern of white flame broke out right before their eyes and began to spread. There were a few startled cries from some of the girls and curses of awe from some of the boys. Seamus seemed speechless but heavily impressed. People were starting to shift around; moving away from the hot flames as they spread outward in all directions rapidly. “Harry, put it out!” Hermione shouted at him. He raised his wand and conjured a stream of water that smothered the licking fire.

He turned to glare at Eddie, who still had two more orbs hovering above him. “That’s enough Carmichael.”

"Are you sure, Potter? I was just gettin' started..." Eddie goaded, closing his 'beauties' in his palm again and tucking them away. "I've got plenty more where these came from. I've got one that melts, one that explodes, one that rips, one that gnaws...I've put all me best spell work into these."

Harry ignored his boasting. "Dark magic, you mean."

There was a considerate pause. These words sank into the silence like a heavy stone in water. "I don't look at it like that," Eddie replied. "It's just magic—it can be used to defend Hogwarts. You know it can."

"Why haven't I ever heard of you, Carmichael?" Harry demanded.

"He's a loner, that's why." Demelza Robbins quipped. "The creepy sort, if you a ask me. He keeps to himself and he hardly opens his trap, isn't that right Eddie?"

"Nobody asked you, Demelza..." he looked down at his abused trainers for a moment; suddenly he didn't seem so sure of himself. Demelza smiled to herself in a satisfied fashion. This didn't go unnoticed by Harry. Eddie ran a hand through his hair and shrugged. "If you don't like my ideas, suit yourself. I still want to be a part of Dumbledore's Army."

"And what next—if we let you in, you'll go 'round blowing off people's ears, will you?" asked Ron, apparently still stung by the 'rubbish' comment. "What if you really are cracked and you really are using dark magic and you accidentally kill one of us, huh?"

"I ain't a nutter, Weasley," retorted Eddie darkly. "I just know..." he paused.

Harry unfolded his arms, standing at attention. He couldn't wait for Carmichael to contemplate whether or not to finish his thought. "You just know what?" Eddie looked Harry right in the eyes.

"I just know what those bastards are capable of, that's all. They deserve what they've got commin' to 'em..."

Harry considered this statement for a small moment, and realized he felt exactly the same way. "Guys...come over here for a second." Already knowing what he wanted, Neville, Ron, Angelina, Ginny, Dean, and Hermione got to their feet and weaved through the crowd towards him. Tonks followed without being asked. She drew incredulous looks from quite a few people (including Seamus), but she ignored them.

"Hey, are you gonna vote on it without us?" Seamus asked heatedly, and Harry held up a hand in a 'just a moment' gesture. The room began to fill again with hushed conversation. Harry turned his back on it, facing a circle of his friends—and Tonks.

"Tonks, good to see you made it," he acknowledged her as Dean, Hermione, Angelina, Ron, Ginny and Neville closed the gaps between them and they all leaned in. "Why are you disguised? I think half the people in here will realize they've never seen you before tonight pretty soon. Daphne Greengrass already looks mutinous..."

"I know her sort," Tonks nodded appreciatively, "I had plenty of girls in my face like her back in my Hogwarts days. I disguised myself to keep us both out of trouble, Harry. McGonagall asked me to check here to see if you'd gone against her."

"Doesn't surprise me," said Harry.

"Are you going to turn us in to McGonagall, then?" Dean inquired.

Tonks paused. "Unfortunately for McGonagall I've already signed Hermione's parchment. I couldn't be a rat even if I had the slightest inclination, now could I?"

Everyone grinned and muttered their thanks to Tonks. Harry moved on. "All right, what do we make of this Carmichael bloke?"

"He's a wanker!" Ron spoke up at once. Hermione shushed him and peered over his shoulder to make sure no one was trying to listen in. Of course they all secretly were, but everyone pretended to be

involved in debates of their own. She saw that Seamus had gone up to Carmichael and had begun a conversation with him.

“But those things of his...” Dean said, gesturing to the scorched wall near them. “They are pretty wicked, you gotta admit, Ron. They looked like...I dunno, curses contained in glass or something?”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “Like he trapped a curse inside them and when they make contact, the spell is released.”

“I’ve seen something like that before,” Tonks spoke up. “In my training.”

“Aurors use that kind of stuff?” Neville asked with great interest.

Tonks nodded, frowning. “Sort of, yes. He’s very clever to have come up with a version of that kind of thing on his own.”

“Clever...” interjected Hermione, “but is he dangerous?”

“To us, or to them?” Angelina countered.

“I can’t decide.” Harry admitted. “Part of me doesn’t trust him as far as I can throw him, but...a bigger part wants to see what else he’s got under his sleeve. Those curse-ball things look really useful. I’ll bet no Death Eater will expect us to have those, would they?”

“I’m with Harry,” said Ginny. Ron made an annoyed face. “Really, Ron, you know you’re just as curious as we are.”

“He’s probably still sore from what Carmichael said about Fred and George selling rubbish.” Dean smirked.

“Your mum, Thomas. This isn’t about my brothers; they’re both gits.” Ron grumbled. “I just don’t trust him. He’s trouble, you mark my words.”

“Ron...” Harry whispered, a gleam developing in his emerald greens. Ron squinted at him, not liking his tone one bit. “If we voted on it and everyone’s in favor of letting him head something up...would you feel

more comfortable if you were on that team? You know—to keep an eye on him?"

"Wha--?!" Ron sputtered. He thought for a moment. Everyone in the circle looked at him expectantly. "Well...I guess so, yeah."

"Then it's settled."

A few seconds later, they broke up and returned their attention to the crowd. Harry cleared his throat and all talk ceased. "Okay. We'll vote on it. All those in favor of a...Doom Squad? Raise your hands."

They waited. Eddie looked around him. Nearly half the room raised their hands. Ron glared at Eddie for a beat, then begrudgingly (and at Seamus' egging) raised his as well. More hands popped up, including Angelina's and Tonks'. Zach Smith and Roger Davis looked sideways at Justin Flinch-Fletchley when he raised his; they shook their heads and their own hands remained resolutely at their sides.

Still, it was obvious that people's intrigue had won over their doubts; Harry's included. "It's settled, then. We now have a Doom Squad. Carmichael, are you volunteering to be leader?"

"Course, yeah..." he looked surprised that the outcome had been in his favor, but he recovered quickly.

"Good. So, if anything goes wrong or anyone's hurt I'm holding you responsible. In fact, we'll chuck the whole idea all together if what you have to show me looks like it belongs on the other side, got it?"

"I don't deal in the Dark Arts, mate. It's one of my more impressive tricks; coming up with these without any of that." He looked impressed with himself again. He grinned that wicked grin. Harry didn't smile back, but he was satisfied that they understood each other.

"All right...pending evidence of these rather dodgy-sounding 'beauties' Carmichael's got stashed away...who's volunteering for the Doom Squad?" Hermione asked after a moment, looking slightly worried and more than a little skeptical. Seamus, Justin, and that

Noah Clarke bloke raised their hands first. They were followed by Tonks and several Gryffindors, and also—to everyone's utter surprise—Padma Patil and Romilda Vane. After a minute of inner-debate, Ron shrugged and raised his hand too.

After a little while longer, everyone had volunteered to do something (duties ranged from the most dangerous in Neville's Second Strike and the most innocuous in Hermione's Administrative) and Harry was pleased. He was plenty nervous still, but now that they'd at least gotten started, he felt a little more confident.

Before they moved on, Angelina caught his eye. She smiled. He took a deep breath...

Minerva paced slowly in the Head's Office. Most of the staff had just left her, not more than ten minutes ago.

She had given them instructions. She had mentioned nothing of Voldemort and Harry, or Harry's power—she had simply passed on to them that a reliable source informed her of a Death Eater plot to try and infiltrate Hogwarts. Snape stared at her blankly the entire time, and he remained silent. When the meeting was over, she spoke to him before he could leave.

"Severus...if young Malfoy is involved in any way...I trust you will inform the Order..."

He understood her, though he did not answer. Without a word he nodded and walked smoothly through the doors behind Tonks. She hoped he would do his duty and not let their earlier standoff cause him to forget his loyalty to Dumbledore and the Order.

"Even if he has isolated himself from us, he can't possibly deny the severity of any threat to Hogwarts..." she whispered to herself thoughtfully. "He is loyal to Albus...and so he shall be loyal to this school..." If only saying it made it certain.

Minerva had paused her pacing, and was now standing with her back to the portraits surrounding her; her hands resting on her hips; lost in contemplation. Alastor was due back any minute. He needed to know what was happening. When she heard a faint noise from behind her,

she did not immediately abandon her deep thought process. The portraits shifting in their frames, perhaps...the hour was not yet late, but most of them would be nodding off by now.

There was a flutter—as she stared at Fawkes' perch, thinking...thinking...the linens covering the tables that held some of Dumbledore's favored objects slid away on their own and rose to take shape. The spindly things now sitting on bare table surfaces stopped their motion and soon they too were floating mid-air. Minerva felt the tiny hairs at the base of her neck rise as the magic touched her—she turned around. Her eyes caught the last few seconds of the linen and silver bits and pieces coming together to form a rather alarming figure that remarkably resembled Albus Dumbledore, right down to the half-moon spectacles and pointy hat.

The headmasters and headmistresses of old sat forward in their frames and stared at the scene without attempting to disguise their intrigue a second longer. There was silence; only the clock on the wall ticked for them in unison with Minerva's pounding heart. She closed her eyes and opened them again while the Dumbledore figure stood quite still across from her, waiting patiently for her to decide that he was real. "Albus...?"

"I see you have taken up my old habit of pacing fretfully across this old floor in a matter of days..." The linen-made Dumbledore obliged her with something akin to a kind smile, nodding its head. "Minerva; good evening."

His voice came through the 'mouth' very clearly; he might as well have been standing right there next to the thing, pulling strings in its back in some bizarre display of puppetry. The tiny silver knobs that made up its pupils twinkled at her within the lens-less spectacles and she put a hand to her heart to steady it.

"I hope you don't mind me calling on you so late—I wanted to answer your letter in person...or..." the silver knobs moved downward to look at the folds of table linen and 'Dumbledore' chuckled, "...rather as much in person as my current situation allows."

"You never cease to amaze me, Albus," was all she could say, looking him up and down and shaking her head. "I won't pretend to know your repertoire inside and out, but this isn't a method I've ever seen you use before. You've adapted it from your travels I take it?"

"Mmm..." the Dumbledore figure laid its head from side to side and shrugged, "more or less. I haven't done this in a very long time. I'm still a bit out of form, but as the Muggles say 'practice makes perfect'. Did I get everything right?" This 'Dumbledore' spread its arms and slowly turned around in a circle for her to see.

She stepped forward, examining the figure as it turned, and crossed her arms appreciatively. "It looks as if you've spared no detail."

"Good. I have one or two more visits to make tonight and I'm hoping each may count as an improvement on my technique. You're never too old to learn something, you know Minerva—or in my case, re-learn."

"Indeed not." They were standing there, smiling slightly in amusement, but very quickly both grew solemn again. "Cornelius is adamant, Albus. Things are very serious..."

'Dumbledore' nodded, sighing at length. "Yes I know. Fortunately I was able to finish what I started in Varna...tomorrow I move on."

"Are you sure it's safe to keep traveling? You run the risk of being spotted again if you aren't careful, Albus. I wouldn't put it past Voldemort or Cornelius to have spies watching everywhere."

"Thank you for your concern—I am being careful." He began to pace slowly; the linen from the tables dragged delicately on the hardwood surface of the floor. The portraits followed him back and forth with their eyes; all hushed and attentive. "Now about Harry...he is growing stronger, isn't he?"

"Yes, it would appear so." Minerva swallowed and nodded at him gravely. She clasped her hands together at her waist and watched the Dumbledore creation move about too. "He has even caused a

disruption in the protective wards around the castle. I'm truly at a loss, Albus, to be honest."

He stopped pacing and cocked a threaded eyebrow at her. "You're in no better position than I was at the start of this, Minerva. But...!" He raised a spindly finger and smiled. "That does not mean that we are in dire straits just yet."

Minerva scoffed. "Optimism is beyond me at this point, I'm afraid."

"Because of what he told you..."

"I believe him. I can feel...they are coming. They are going to try."

"Hmmm..." he scratched his chin. "And the staff has been informed, I assume?"

"Yes, tonight. We've gone through the necessary procedures in case..." she sighed and rubbed her forehead—an ache was starting. "I've also told Nymphadora to keep an eye on Draco Malfoy."

"You believe him to possess inside knowledge of Voldemort's plan?"

"I won't take any chances."

"Good. Good...and Dumbledore's Army?" She hesitated. He walked forward, reaching out both 'hands' to grasp her gently by the elbows. She tried to imagine the real face of the man as she gazed up into the folds of fabric; into the shiny-metallic 'eyes'. If those beads imitating his real eyes could convey emotion properly, what would she see reflected in them?

"I told Potter to disband the D.A."

"Did you?" She recognized the trace of polite surprise now passing through the enchanted imitation of Dumbledore's wizened face. "Whatever for?"

"Isn't that what you would've done? There's no need for one with Umbridge due for a long stay at Azkaban."

"I'm not so sure." He let her go and turned his back on her, rubbing his chin yet again. Minerva walked around impatiently to face him.

"Not so sure about what?"

"I mean that I'm not sure if continuing down my original path of trying to shield Harry and his peers from dangers we believe beyond them is such a good idea anymore. Isn't that why you wrote to me in the first place? Wasn't that your stand on the matter when you dismissed Severus and decided what must be done with Harry? I agreed with you then, though it was hard to, and I agree with you now...but it sounds like you are in doubt of your own beliefs. That is no way to start, Minerva." She gaped at him, feeling her confidence lessen with each word. "When I say these things to you, I mean that you should not be asking me what I would have done. We agreed; that time is over. What you should be doing is going ahead with your plan...and the plan is the thing! The plan is to prepare Harry for what lies ahead, not blind him to it as I have done. And why should you not allow him to do what comes naturally to him? He will always need to look out for his fellow man, Minerva," Dumbledore said proudly. "It is one of his most inspiring traits..."

"But I cannot see what lies ahead! Everything's been tossed in the air and damned if I know where the chips will fall!"

"Nothing is certain until it is in the past, this is true. However..." Dumbledore smirked, if that was what one could call such a shape creasing the folds of linen that made up the face. "I don't know about you, but I would rather not delay. If we have a chance of drawing it out before Voldemort catches wind of it, I would rest easier. And he is close...very close...there is no time to lose. Until Harry's proper training can begin, this D.A. will provide a means for him to work through his confusion. I feel good about it."

"Do you think he can control it...?" whispered Minerva, referring to the power slumbering deep within Harry Potter. That nameless magic stirring like a cranky beast in a dark cave whilst the world moved noisily about outside; ignorant of the danger lying in wait there. "Do you really think we can use it against Voldemort?"

The make-shift Dumbledore paused. "Considering the alternative—I'd say it would be in our best interest to make sure that we can."

Harry lay in bed, unable to even consider going to sleep. He was wide awake and restless. He would toss and turn, but he didn't want to disturb the others, who were all sleeping soundly.

Angelina had denied him her company tonight. She said they both had things to think about, and that he didn't need any more distractions from practicing his Occlumency. She said that it would behoove him now, more than ever, to give it a good earnest try. Of course, Hermione had whole-heartedly agreed with her. He did not protest. Things had gone relatively successfully at the D.A. meeting tonight. Aside from the strangeness of Eddie Carmichael and his 'beauties'; aside from the mystification (and suspicion) he still felt about so many Slytherins showing up; he rather felt that it had gone much better than he originally thought it would. Angelina had muttered something on their way sneaking back up to the Tower that Harry couldn't forget very easily, no matter how embarrassed he was to have liked hearing it as much as he did. "You know...you really have a way with people, Harry."

You really have a way with people...

Did he? No, is mind retorted instantly. You're an awkward, specky git...she was just saying that because she's your girlfriend.

Harry chuckled silently at his own expense before he allowed himself to realize that Angelina didn't just say things. When she gave an opinion, she meant it. That was one of the things that he had always admired about her: her ability to remain resolutely honest and forthcoming when no one else dared to.

He had attempted to do as Hermione and Angelina suggested – he closed the curtains around his four-poster and tried to concentrate. He closed his mind to noise and sat still...he breathed in and out...he found a place of peace, and his Patronus erupted from the tip of his wand when he had come down from his meditation. Whether or not he could more easily occlude himself tonight still remained a mystery, though. He now found himself, though feeling very in tune with his

own senses and body, encumbered with plans for the D.A., theories on what trap Voldemort might have his minions setting for him at that moment, and...

...the Department of Mysteries.

His name had been scrawled on an aged, dust-yellow label on the shelf where the prophecy sat waiting for him to simply pluck it down. What would he discover if ever he were to hear it? His curiosity had steadily been growing more and more intense as the hours passed, and now it was the fuel driving his restlessness as he lay there listening to Neville's snoring. Could he possibly waylay Voldemort enough to take the prophecy for himself? Could he survive this attack; this 'trap'; and later walk into the Ministry of Magic during the light of day? Could he ever have the opportunity to be escorted, perhaps, into the Department of Mysteries so that he could hear it with his own ears? It was his prophecy, wasn't it? If no one else could, surely he, Harry James Potter--the person whose name was on the thing--should be able to retrieve it...?

Harry was lost in his thoughts and didn't notice that Neville's snore-sounds had ceased. In fact, all movement came to a silent, seamless halt as he lay there staring up at the crimson fabric of the bed hangings. As his four roommates fell under the spell, a gust of wind blew the window next to Harry's bed open. He frowned and looked around to see if anyone had been jarred awake. All was quiet.

His brow furrowing more deeply, Harry swept his covers away from his legs and sat up, pulling back the bed hangings to look out the window. There was nothing outside but the grounds and the moon and the lake, all sitting there the way they always did. Another breeze blew in, rustling Harry's hair gently...almost beckoning to him. He reached under his pillow and retrieved his wand, his heartbeat climbing steadily as a tightly wound feeling of apprehension seized him. Everything was too quiet...the stillness too thick. The window frame that had been blown open began to shudder slightly, and Harry sat up on his haunches, staring intensely out into the night, waiting...his wand in a firm grip...

A cluster of leaves and fallen flower buds swept in after a moment, pouring over the ledge like they'd been tipped out of an invisible bucket in through the window. Harry pulled his glasses on and watched as more leaves and buds poured in over the sill, his small desk, his trunk, pooling on the floor. They did not simply fall there and lay like lifeless things were supposed to, however. They swirled upward as though caught in a whirlpool of wind, and began to take shape.

Harry's heart was thundering now; he raised his wand, his mind reeling with the notion that not one of his roommates had so much as twitched since this started. Alarmed, he watched as the pale, delicate buds and the paper-thin leaves took the form of a tall, slender wizard. Oh no, Harry's stomach filled with dread.

No one—not Neville, not Ron, not Seamus or Dean—would stir or open their eyes to see what Harry was seeing, and this drove the fifteen-year-old boy to act. He raised his wand and whipped a spell from its tip as hard as he could. The leaves and buds were blasted apart and Harry jumped up from his bed, dashing straight for Ron. “Ron! Ron—wake up! Now!” He shook the ginger-haired boy fiercely but to no avail. Ron lay as motionless and dense as a sack of flour.

Pushing down the pin-prick of panic that tried to force its way into his throat, Harry aimed his wand at Ron's face and produced a gush of cold water. Ron did not move an inch.

“Harry there is no need for that...” came a voice from behind him. It was not Voldemort's voice, nor the voice of some murderous Death Eater, he quickly realized. It was Dumbledore's voice. “To be honest, if I were Mister Weasley, I would be very cross with you when I woke and found myself soaking wet from the neck up.” An amused chuckle.

Ceasing the icy bathing of Ron's face, Harry turned around and saw that the flowers and leaves he had blasted apart had reassembled themselves, and were now quite plainly taking the shape of Albus Dumbledore. He balked as he watched the shoestrings from his chucks snake their way out of their holes and go to join the wizard, forming spectacles on the face where two icy-blue buds settled as eyes.

Harry stood breathing hard, in his night clothes, bewildered and speechless. When his chest loosened up enough for him to speak, he muttered, "Dum...Dumbledore?"

The thing smiled kindly at him—it was insane to him that he could tell this—and inclined its...head. "Yes! I am sorry for startling you. I don't really have a say in things until I'm of a decent fashion, you know, so I'm afraid I had to wait until at least my eyes were on straight before I could announce myself." The eyes trembled a bit and Harry recognized their attempt to twinkle behind those half-moons made up of his dirty shoe strings—this was so bizarre!

Dumbledore was here. He had come to speak with Harry. He had done something...a spell of some kind...to Harry's roommates, and cast a spell on himself to appear to Harry in this strange form. "Professor McGonagall asked you to come?" Harry asked quietly. "She told you I needed to ask you some questions..."

"Yes, that she did," said Dumbledore. "But, I believe I would've come to you sooner or later even without her tenacity involved." Another 'twinkle'. Harry walked steadily towards the eerie figure fashioned out of swaying, fluttery leaves and petals...the window was still open and when a small gust of it would pass through, it made them sing softly. It was quite pleasant, almost like a faint wind chime.

"Well, what did you do the others? Are they all right?" He knew he didn't really need to ask that question—Dumbledore would never hurt a hair on a student's head intentionally.

But, the elder wizard obliged the boy in a soft voice. "They are perfectly safe...just sleeping a great deal more soundly than normal. I think you'll find them full of incredibly amusing stories about their dreams in the morning."

Dumble-flora moved to sit down on the edge of Harry's bed, and reached out a hand (made of quills from a bunch that had been sitting in Harry's desk drawer) to indicate the space next to him. After only a second's hesitation, Harry sat down too. Now that the man was here, Harry was annoyed slightly to find he didn't know where to begin.

There was just so much that had happened between now and when Dumbledore had been forced to leave the castle...

"May I tell you something, Harry?"

The boy looked up into the face and nodded, not minding at all that he didn't have to speak just yet. "Sure..."

There was a pause. "I'm very sorry."

"For what?"

"For treating you the way I have...for making things worse for you...when I should have--"

"Done me the courtesy of telling me the truth?" Harry's heart skipped a beat—he had never talked to Dumbledore like that. He felt a burning shame reach his cheeks and he looked away. Along with this, though, he could feel traces of his anger towards the old man stirring. He fixed his gaze on the furnace in front of them and sat silent.

"Yes," said Dumbledore after a little while. He didn't sound angry, but rather remorseful. It almost made Harry look at him again, but he kept his eyes where they were for now. "Yes I should have told you the truth." Dumbledore sighed. "I should have told you...about the existence of a prophecy in which both you and Voldemort are linked, just as you are linked through your minds and emotions...just as, if we are terribly unlucky, you could be linked through your power..."

Harry was definitely looking at Dumbledore (or this...shifting pile of leaves posing as him, anyway) now. "Through my power?"

"Yours and his, Harry. Right now they are very close; much closer than before; entwined and co-dependent." Harry could see the grave expression clearly in the 'eyes' and 'mouth'. "They are almost one...that is why I asked Professor Snape to teach you to occlude yourself. That is why I tried to keep your thoughts away from your dreams as much as possible. Why I—foolishly—tried to force you to suppress your anger. I should have realized that in shielding you from what was rightfully yours (the truth), I only increased your feelings of

anger and confusion...I only made the power inside you grow stronger and emerge much sooner than I would have liked."

Harry couldn't help muttering: "Sooner than you would've liked? If you ask me, it's coming out just in time, seeing as how he's aiming to lure to me to my death again."

"Harry."

Harry looked again into the replica of the wizened face, which now seemed very solemn. The pupil buds seemed narrowed and the way they were fixed on him made him sit up slightly. Wind and leaves, petals and dust this reproduction of Dumbledore may have been, but the old wizard's magnificent presence was nonetheless felt by Harry, as though he were yet again in the Head's office with him, appreciating the usually brilliant color of his robes under the candle light.

"Tell me what you have dreamt since you first told me about your visions of the Department of Mysteries," asked Dumbledore.

Harry took a small breath and began to speak. He relayed everything in his dreams and daylight visions to Dumbledore, leaving no detail out, and the elder wizard sat listening without a word. When he was finished, Dumbledore nodded grimly.

"I have avoided speaking with you about it in hopes that Voldemort would be less tempted to do you harm if he didn't suspect how close we are to each other..." Harry's mind whipped back to those moments in time when he felt the strangest, strongest urge to hurt Dumbledore badly upon eye contact with him, "but I can see now that it doesn't matter anymore..."

"Why not?" the boy could not help asking in a thin whisper.

"Because from what Minerva has explained to me; and what you have just reconfirmed; Voldemort's current target is you...and you alone Harry."

"The prophecy..." muttered Harry, Dumbledore's words ringing in his ears.

"Yes, the prophecy. It is a stepping stone to what he hopes shall be his first devastating blow to any resistance of his return to power—your death." Dumbledore sighed again and leaned closer, his voice dropping low. "You see Harry—he has been laying a trap for you this entire year. This latest plan of his has sprung up out of desperation; despite that every measure I've taken to protect you has gone awry, it seems you have still managed to evade his true intent...to lure you to the Department of Mysteries."

"So that I can take the prophecy for him...so he can find out how to kill me..." continued Harry mutedly.

"That is what he believes, yes."

"What do you mean?"

Those strange 'eyes' poured into him—Dumbledore stared at him so intensely and so long that Harry at first thought the spell had gone wonky and the old man was stuck like that; motionless and trapped in a cocoon of dead leaves. But, after a moment, he understood what Dumbledore was looking for in his, Harry's, green eyes. He was looking to see if Voldemort was prowling somewhere within, watching...waiting...soaking up all that they talked about. Harry knew this information was very important; he knew that in the wrong hands, it would be devastating. He was a dead man, probably, if Voldemort heard this stuff. After it seemed Dumbledore was satisfied that there was nothing lurking behind Harry's eyes but Harry's own intense need to find out the truth, he went on just as quietly as before.

"Harry...you must understand...I have dreaded this moment since before you were born...I...I did not even tell your parents Lily and James everything. It has occurred to me since I've been away that I care for you a great deal more than I allowed myself to believe...you are...very dear to me my boy..."

Harry was moved...he couldn't think what to say. He allowed his curiosity about the prophecy to overwhelm the awkwardness of Dumbledore's admission, but not before he managed to mumble: "I...I care about you, too, Professor."

He thought he saw an appreciative, even self-conscious smile there, but it was gone quickly and they moved on.

"The prophecy was made a month before you were born, at the Leaky Cauldron," he began; Harry hung on his words. "It was made to me, and I was obliged to have it kept in the Hall of Prophecy. Only two people knew of its existence...the Seer who foretold it had not even been aware that she had done so...she was in a deep trance and had no memory of the occurrence." Here Dumbledore paused and stared away at the furnace, as Harry had done earlier.

"But that doesn't make sense. You said two people knew—if it wasn't the Seer then who else heard, professor?"

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows (or rather the thick, pale leaves that served as eyebrows), looking distracted. "One of Voldemort's Death Eaters, I'm afraid, was able to hear the first part of the prophecy before he was discovered eavesdropping and thrown out of the pub..."

"And that's..." Harry's heart went to work on him again...he swallowed hard, turning his wand around in his now clammy hands over and over again, quite forgetting about the four comatose boys serving as their silent audience. "...that's why Voldemort killed my parents. Because..."

"Because he heard that a child was to be born; a child with the power to 'vanquish the Dark Lord'. He murdered your parents, and tried to murder you, Harry...because he had been told that a boy born in July, whose parents had thrice defied him, would be the wizard who would one day put an end to him."

"That's what the prophecy says?"

"Yes...at least the part that was relayed to Voldemort."

"Well what does the other part say?"

"The other part..." Harry turned slightly in his sitting position, not wishing for Dumbledore to perform one of his meaningful pauses now, of all times to add one. "The other part, Harry, is the part that Voldemort wants to hear desperately, now. Because he is convinced that it will reveal something to him...something he missed before...something he can use...something that will tell him how to rid himself of you once and for all..." to Harry's chagrin, the elder wizard stood up. "...and that's why I cannot go on...not just yet. You still have not mastered Occlumency--"

"Yeah, well, Snape was a lousy teacher!" snapped Harry before he could help it. He rose to his feet as well, his temper flaring unexpectedly and rather swiftly. Dumbledore's magicked self had its back to him. "Why did you come?" Harry breathed, his jaw going rigid with the resentment he was trying to hold at bay. It was as though a damn had broken loose suddenly, and at any moment a raging river of emotion would flood out of him if he didn't maintain some control over himself. "Why did you come here at all...? All you just did was dangle a little bit of the truth in front of my face like I'm sort of rat! Like I'll keep following you and doing what you say I should if you keep teasing me with it! IT'S NO DIFFERENT THAN WHAT VOLDEMORT IS DOING!"

Harry was aware that he had lost control...he was aware of it...and he didn't care. That feeling...that feeling of immense hatred began to churn deep within. As this Dumbledore imposter turned around to face him slowly, the leaves and petals began to flutter and shift even more...and the edges began to crisp and singe under the heat of Harry's rising anger. Dumbledore's eyes narrowed.

"Harry...it was not my intention to tease you with anything..." he said carefully; quietly. Harry was sick of that quiet, calm manner. He was sick of that politeness and he was sick of being patronized. Well, he could speak calmly and quietly too, couldn't he?

"Dumbledore," said Harry in a cold, high voice, feeling white-hot all over. "You're a fool to keep the boy in the dark."

"So I keep telling myself..." answered the professor.

"Tell me...what does the prophecy say in full?"

"I cannot tell you that, I'm afraid."

"Why do you have fear in your voice, old man? Do you think I would harm you now? Could I...could I use this boy as more than a vessel to speak if I wish? Could I do more than cause him pain? Could I...?"

"Tom—go back to your darkness now. Go back to your plots and schemes. Harry Potter is no more your plaything than I am."

Harry threw his head back and laughed. He laughed at the pitiful pile of ashen leaves posing as a great wizard and felt as though his brain might split in two. He was furious and frightened all at once. He was both confused and extremely clear about what was happening. He was both right there and far away...

"I could kill him now."

"You could try—and probably cause him quite a bit of pain—but you won't succeed. If you dare try to come any closer, you will suffer to your death, and I think you know that. Unless, of course," and the wretched old man actually smiled, "you've forgotten that his mother's blood protects him from you. You haven't forgotten that, have you Tom?"

Harry felt an indescribably strong urge to spit in Dumbledore's face. "There is something you don't want me to know...there is something you are trying desperately to hide..."

"Oh, everyone has their share of secrets. I only want you to leave Harry alone and pick on a wizard your own size for once, if you are capable." He was smiling again. Abhorrent old man.

Harry glared at Dumbledore...and then his mind actually did feel like it had been rent in two. He buckled over and fell to his knees...he tried to fight it...it was happening again...oh god it was terrible. He

beat his fist against the hard wood floor, grunting and squirming on his knees at Dumbledore's feet...until...with a nasty, cold rush...the pain stopped.

"Harry."

Swallowing down the nausea that was fighting to rise, Harry looked up. "I'm sorry...I didn't mean to get so upset...I couldn't help myself." He rambled weakly. "He got in, didn't he? I tried...but I'm no good at Occlumency--!"

"Harry...it's all right." Dumbledore knelt. He reached out his quill-made hands and held Harry's shoulders firm. The blue buds in the shoe-string frames quivered slightly. "Right now, the only thing I ask of you is this: bear with me, a little while longer. This is not a demand...in fact if you wish me to tell you everything I know at this very moment, whatever the risk, I would because I owe you at least that much and more."

The boy wanted to speak, but Dumbledore went on.

"I am begging you now Harry...please...wait a little longer. Prepare yourself and your friends for battle; for a battle is approaching whether anyone likes it or not. Protect yourself and your loved ones...and when this storm is over...I will take you to the Department of Mysteries and we will open the prophecy side-by-side and you will hear every word of it. You will know the whole truth and I will not attempt to shield you from it any longer I promise!"

"But I've waited so long..." whispered the boy.

"I know." The voice issuing from the leaves quivered with remorse. "I know..."

Harry took a breath—the nausea was leaving him finally. "Will you be there when I start training?"

"I will be abroad for a very long time yet, but I promise I will stop in on you as frequently as I can." He paused. "I am ready now to let you to do what you must, Harry. You are young—but you are strong also,

and special. I have seen you do extraordinary things from a very young age. Now is no different. I believe that you can shut Voldemort out, and keep him out. And you must try, Harry...you must..."

"I will."

"Good." They rose to their feet together and Harry could feel the breeze from outside the window picking up. His heart lurched—Dumbledore was about to leave. The wind howled faintly and blew in on them, cooling the warm air in the room. The figure of leaves shuddered. The shoe-strings began to twist loose. "I'm proud of you, Harry..." the voice blew across him and the figure burst apart, gliding on the breeze through the window.

He was gone.

Harry heard Neville's snores start up almost immediately. He stood in the middle of the room, his eyes roaming from bed to bed, an empty feeling coming over him. The only thing for him to do now, he decided, was to proceed as planned—and the plan was the thing.

I made a mixtape for you. Check out the "Lessons" playlist by clicking on the link in my profile. Enjoy some mood music while you read!

CHP24